

Next Chapter by TrashFan

Series: [TrashFan's Open Book universe \[2\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Bisexual Mike Wheeler, Fluff, Fluff and Angst, Gay Will Byers, Hardships, Joyce Byers is a blessing, M/M, Max's bad home life, all of them - Freeform, budding relationship - Freeform, the Will & Max friendship nobody knew they needed, the boys need hugs

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Will Byers & Eleven & Dustin Henderson & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-27

Updated: 2018-05-30

Packaged: 2022-04-22 04:55:05

Rating: Not Rated

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 20

Words: 40,129

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

After an incident with a certain sketch book landing open, Mike Wheeler and Will Byers are trying to make things work. What all "things" means, they don't know yet. But they know they like being together. And they definitely know they don't like what happens when their little secret is no longer just theirs.

Sequel to "When The Book Opens," but works perfectly well as a stand-alone.

1. The Clearing

“Hang on, I know it's here somewhere.”

“Not trying to be a pessimist, but seeing as you've never been here before, how do you know we're close?”

“Oh, be quiet,” Will shushed with a smile. “Max told me it was around here somewhere - You just have to look at the spaces in between the trees.”

“Okay, then. And what exactly are we looking for in these spaces?” Mike asked. Will pointed to a few places, but Mike's eyes continued to be blank. Will rolled his eyes and decided to search for himself.

Only a few minutes of bickering and silly faces later, Will cried out, “Aha! There it is! To the left of that split trunk, see how there's a bit more light filtering through?”

Will pushed his way through the overgrowth and winced as he felt thorns brush his thighs. His vision was obscured by the ridiculous amount of vegetation in his face, and he was beginning to wonder if maybe he had gotten the wrong spot when he finally broke through into a clearing.

'Clearing' might have been the wrong word. The space was small like Max said it would be, a rough circle maybe ten feet across where the plant life gave way to a soft weedless grass. What Max hadn't told Will was just how beautiful it was. Will was never much into nature or biology class, so he couldn't say what kinds of trees and flowers lined the space, but the colors were absolutely breathtaking. It was late enough in the year that most of the buds had wilted, but there were still enough survivors to tell what shades of pinks and purples and reds they used to be. The way the sun filtered down through the orange-brown leaves made him wish he had Jonathan's camera with him.

A few moments later, Mike came crashing unceremoniously through the brush. “Whoa,” he breathed, coming to a dazed stop at Will's side.

"I know."

"Is this really where she and Lucas have been going to get away?"

"Yeah, that's what Max told me. Anytime they wanted to be together without worrying about her parents finding out, this was their spot."

"How'd they even find it?" Mike asked.

"She said that she just stumbled into it when she was looking for a spot to pee during a hike."

"Max hikes?"

"Yeah. There's a whole lot we don't know about her, actually. It's been nice hanging out with her more," Will shrugged.

"It's been nice hanging out with you more."

As Mike brushed his hand against Will's, Will's heart leapt into overdrive. He felt foolish every time he reacted so strongly to Mike's touch, but it was the sort of foolishness he was completely fine with. The events of the past two months seemed like a whirlwind and he still pinched himself on occasion to see if it was real. After he heard his sketch of Mike leaning in to kiss him fell open in front of Mike, Dustin, and Troy, Will thought his life was over. But with Troy pressured into silence, Dustin learning to deal with it, and Mike kissing his forehead at the homecoming dance, everything was turning out much better than he ever could have dreamed.

"You okay?" Mike asked, startling Will out of his reverie.

"Mmm? Yeah, just thinking. It's nice to spend more time with you too," he grinned up at his friend.

"You ready?"

"Of course."

Will let his backpack fall off of his shoulders, swung it around to his front, and unzipped it. Out came the large blanket that usually carpeted Castle Byers, two Tab sodas, two of his mom's special grilled

chicken sandwiches, and a Mars Bar. He leaned over and placed the blanket on the ground carefully.

“I know these aren't the most picnic-y foods, but it was the best I could do on short notice.”

His stomach flipped at the smile Mike flashed him. “I love it.”

Will was starting to lower himself onto the blanket when his friend spoke again.

“I may have brought a few things too.”

“Hey! Not allowed! You promised you would let me do it this time, last time you insisted on carrying all our crap the entire bike ride,” Will protesting, putting on a pout both boys knew was half-hearted.

“I just grabbed a few things I figured you might not think of. I already brought it, are you really not gonna let me take them out?”

Will tried to keep a straight face as Mike grinned and poked at his ribs, but his efforts were futile. “Fine! What do you have?”

Mike stuck his tongue out and dug through his backpack to pull out two of his mom's square couch cushions. “To sit on,” he explained.

Will wanted to be mad, but he couldn't find it in him. He crossed his arms. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” Mike reached in his hand and pulled out an oversized hoodie. “For when you inevitably get cold.”

“You presumptive asshole,” Will laughed, all show of annoyance disappearing.

“So you're telling me you're not chilly right now?”

Will snatched the sweatshirt away and started to pull it on. “Shut up, that's not the point.”

“I love it when you get sassy with me,” Mike wiggled his eyebrows.

Will wished he could say the flush in his cheeks was from the wind. The boys sat down on their pillows and started to dig into their secret feast. In a lot of ways it felt the same as the last ten years of friendship. They had the same playful banter and easy conversation, the same familiar ease, but something new was there as well. Will didn't force himself to break eye contact after just a few seconds. He didn't spend all of his energy paying attention to his hand motions and wrists to make sure they didn't encroach on the feminine style he took up with his family. In short, he didn't have to worry about every little thing he did that might make him look gay. He didn't have to pretend he didn't feel the way he did.

They spent way too long talking and laughing, and they continued to sit there long after they had finished their food. Realistically it was a Thursday night, and they both had a mountain of homework to do, but Will pushed that to the back of his mind. Eventually when his back was sore from sitting up straight for so long, the smaller boy flopped backwards and moved the pillow from his butt to his head. When had it started to get dark out? The trees surrounding them blocked their sight from any sort of sunset, but the circle of sky above them was tinted purple with twilight. After a brief pause, Will heard a shuffling noise and saw Mike laying down next to him out of the corner of his eye. He felt his breath quicken.

"You know, when Mr. Clark started the unit on astronomy last year, I was afraid it would take away the magic for me," Mike said quietly, "but it's just made me appreciate the stars even more."

"I used to be able to name twenty four different constellations."

"I still can."

"Really?" Will asked.

"Yeah, of course. It's not quite dark enough, but see that bright one? It's part of my favorite constellation. Jeff."

Will snorted and rolled his eyes. "What?"

"What do you mean what? I'm naming the different constellations," Mike put his hand to his chest as if he were insulted.

“Oh my god.”

“That cloud over there? That's covering up where Janet will be. And over by that branch is Paul Newman Jr.”

“You're such a dork, Michael Wheeler.”

“I know,” he said with a showy smile.

Will was about to say something else, but it was wiped from his mind when he felt Mike's hand ghost over his own. Will flipped his palm over, intertwined his fingers with Mike's, and felt the warmth shoot up his arm and down into his chest. He realized that there were five year olds who held hands with the people they liked, but this felt so much stronger than anything he'd ever experienced. To be fair, he hadn't experienced much, but he knew without a hint of doubt that most people didn't feel this way about holding hands.

Will steeled himself and rolled onto his side to face Mike without dropping his hand. “I'm glad the book fell open.”

Mike rolled over as well and their eyes connected. “Me too. I never thought things would turn out like this, but I like that they did.”

Will knew it was cliché, but he truly felt lost in Mike's eyes. The way they shined down at him without looking away or moving made him feel *seen* and *solid* and just *there*. He tried to ignore the thousand things running through his mind and the thousand butterflies in his stomach as he licked his lips. Moving so slowly the change was almost unnoticeable, he shifted closer to the boy next to him. Without blinking, without looking away, he leaned in closer and closer to the lips he had stared at so many times. He could feel Mike's breath and he tried to ignore the feeling it sent down his spine.

“Wait,” came a murmur.

Will pulled back. “What?”

“I—” Mike began before breaking off.

“S-sorry. I didn't mean to, I shouldn't have...” Will could feel his whole face going scarlet.

Mike shook his head quickly. "No. I want to. God, you have no idea how much I want to. It's just I can't."

Will felt a sickening twist in his stomach. Had he been blowing everything out of proportion? Was this some tangled delusion of his that Mike had been too kind to shatter?

Seeming to sense his panic, Mike smiled gently. "It's okay. It's just... I can't right now. I want to, I will, I promise," he looked down at his hands, "I'm just scared. I'm not ready yet. And I know that's so fucking stupid, because obviously I've kissed people before, you know? And I've admitted to you and to myself that I want to do it, but doing it is just...you know?"

Will nodded back and inhaled deeply, unaware he had been holding his breath. "Yeah, that makes a weird amount of sense. I get it."

"I'm sorry. I wish I could. I want so badly to be able to right now. I'm so fucking sorry," Mike's voice cracked on the last word and Will could almost hear his own heart shatter.

"Hey, none of that. It's fine, I promise. I'll never try to make you do something you aren't ready for. This shit is hard, I get that. Please don't be sorry," Will murmured, placing a hand on Mike's arm.

Mike bit his lip and nodded slowly. He gestured at Will's chest and opened his arms a little. "Can I...?"

It took Will a minute to get it, but once he did he smiled and motioned his friend in. Mike fell into Will, and Will's wrapped his arms around him. He could feel the other boy's head snuggled into the space between his chest and his shoulder and he felt more comfortable and at peace than he could ever remember being. Will lifted a hand and started twirling Mike's hair around it softly.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Will hummed. "As slow as you need, okay?"

"Promise?"

"I promise. *As slow as you need.*"

“Will?” he murmured.

“Yeah?”

“I’m scared.”

Will tucked his head in and breathed in the scent of his best friend. “I am too.”

2. The Invitation

Max was starting to doubt if this was a good idea. Mrs. Byers had given her the spare key almost a month ago, but she hadn't used it until today. It just felt wrong to be in their house without their laughter and light to fill it up. But after what she came home to after school today, she'd turned towards this familiar respite without a second thought. She hadn't even taken the time to grab her skateboard, she'd just run the mile and a half between her house and this one.

That was nearly four hours ago. Mrs. Byers' work schedule was absolutely crazy, so there was no guessing how late she would be home, but Max assumed Will would make his way in eventually. She envisioned one of them walking in and figuring out how long she'd been loitering on their couch, watching episode after episode of *Twilight Zone* reruns. She shuddered at the awkwardness of the scene. She really should be getting out of there, but she also knew she couldn't go home, not after the way she left. Lucas' house held too much risk of her parents finding out, Dustin was at the dentist today, and Max honestly didn't feel close enough to Mike to show up on his doorstep out of the blue. So El and Hopper's place it was. She told her body to move off the couch, but nothing happened. When had her muscles become jelly? Maybe it was the four hours sitting perfectly still, or maybe her crying jag earlier had exhausted her. Either way, she decided to give herself five more minutes before forcing herself to get up.

It was minute three of this time limit when the telltale creak of the front door echoed through the room.

"Finally," Max called. "I'm not sure how you managed to turn the ten minute bike ride into four and a half hours, but honestly I'm impressed. That might be a new record."

As the sound of Joyce Byers' jangling key ring reached her ears, Max swore. She hadn't even considered Will's mom making it home before he did. She couldn't fucking explain this to Joyce. Without thinking, Max hid her face in her hand, wincing as her palm connected with her left cheek just a bit too hard.

“Sorry honey, Will's at Mike's place today. It's just me,” Mrs. Byers called out, her voice getting closer.

Shit shit shit. Max should have left when she'd had the chance. Stupid 'five more minutes.' She had no contingency plan for this.

“Max sweetie, what's going on?” Joyce must have gotten closer than Max had thought - her voice sounded like it was on the couch next to her, which meant she couldn't break her awkward position of face-in-hands.

“Uh, nothing. I'm fine Mrs. Byers. Sorry to worry you.”

“Look at me. What's happening? Are you okay?”

Max shook her head, still keeping it hidden. “Everything's alright, I promise. I just wanted to hang out with Will, but if he's not here I should get going.”

“Max, please look at me,” the little girl felt a hand gently guiding her chin up, and she resigned herself to what was about to happen.

“Mrs. Byers, it's really not as bad as it seems, I swear.”

The way the woman was looking at her made Max want to cry. Joyce's eyes were so big and shiny and full of concern, it physically hurt Max to know she was doing this to such an amazing human being.

“Oh, sweetie...” Mrs. Byers breathed.

She shrugged. “It's just because I'm a pale redhead, it's not as bad as it looks.”

“May I?” Joyce asked, raising a hand midway to her face.

“Fine,” Max surrendered.

She closed her eyes as Mrs. Byers softly traced the outline of the angry, swollen bruise that engulfed the left side of her face. There were no distinct markings the last time Max looked at it in the mirror, but from the pattern Mrs. Byers' fingers traced, she guessed

that there was now a welt where her step-father's ring had been.

"What happened?" she asked quietly.

Max took a breath around the lump that had begun to form in her throat. "Three guesses."

"Why didn't you tell me it's gotten this bad?"

"It hasn't, not really. This is just my family. Every once in a while I forget my place and try to stand up for my mom, and it turns from a scream to a hit real quick. It's only ever one at a time, and it's never been worse than what you're looking at now."

"Maxine," Joyce whispered softly. Max had to swallow. Whereas everyone else in her life used her full name when she was in trouble, Mrs. Byers used it when she was trying to show sincerity, and it just about killed the girl every time.

"Last time was seven months ago, the time before that was a year and a half ago."

The older woman sighed and rubbed at her face. "Come with me."

Max let herself be led into the kitchen and tried not to wince when a bag of frozen carrots was pressed to her temple. She went without a fight when she was told to sit down.

"Here's how this works. I won't ask you any questions twice – I'll believe your word. But that means you have to tell me the truth, don't sugar coat anything. Are we clear?"

Max paused before nodding slowly.

"Are you safe at home?"

She bit her lip. Today's incident really was the worst that it ever got, it was just a shame that the bruise was on her face this time around. "Yes, I think I am."

"Have you noticed your step-dad getting any worse recently?"

She paused to consider it. "I don't think so, no."

"How bad were things when you left the house today?"

Max inhaled. "Pretty bad. I don't think I'm welcome back for a little bit. I usually give it a seventy-two hour cooling off period if I can."

Joyce nodded. "Okay. And is there any way I can convince you to file a report?"

"Absolutely not."

She sighed. "That's what I figured. So here's what's going to happen—"

"Mrs. Byers, thank you, but I've done this before, I know what to do."

Joyce raised her eyebrows defiantly at the fourteen year old. "Here is what is going to happen. You're staying here tonight. Jonathan has already signed off on you using his bed any time he's off at college. I doubt you want to go to school with a face like that, and I have tomorrow off anyway. You're gonna stay here through this weekend and let yourself heal, and hopefully when Monday rolls around, time and makeup will be enough to cover it up so we can get you back to school. We're going to talk to Hop—"

"I really can't do that, you don't understand—" The expression on Mrs. Byers face was enough to cut Max off without even making a sound.

"We are going to talk to Hopper off the record so he can keep an eye on the situation. And after all that, if you still want to go back home, you can."

Max bit her lip and shifted her weight. "Why are you doing this?" she whispered.

"Because I'm a mom. When I told you you were welcome here anytime, I meant it. Now do we have ourselves a deal?"

Max, who was feeling littler and littler by the minute, nodded softly. Will had had a lot of rotten luck, but his mom wasn't part of that. Max tried to imagine what it would be like growing up in this woman's care, but she had to snap out of it when she felt a torrent of

tears coming on. She always said that she hated Indiana, but Goddamn it if she didn't love Hawkins.

“Now,” Mrs. Byers said in a lighter tone, patting Max's knee. “What do you want for dinner?”

Notes for the Chapter:

I definitely think this chapter is the outlier of what you guys have seen so far. Thoughts?

3. The Sketch

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this one took so much longer than usual, there were some bits in here that were really hard for me to work through. Enjoy!

Since their entry into high school, Mike had memorized Will's defensive stance. He had only started doing it this year, and one had to look closely to even notice it, but Mike had spent enough time sneaking feverish glances at the boy to spot it a mile away. When asked about it, Will just said that he was tired of regretting the things he stuttered when he was confronted. Spine straight, shoulders squared, jaw hard, and unblinking eye contact had become the boy's go-to defense mechanism, and in a sense it had worked. Kids didn't come around to give him shit near as often as they used to. The downside was when they did decide to mess with him, they took their sweet time with it.

So when Mike turned into the science wing of the school and saw his friend glaring at a set of eyes straight in front of him, he sprinted towards Will. It wasn't until he was just a few feet away that he realized the antagonist was none other than Troy. Of course, who the fuck else.

It didn't matter that Troy didn't have a hand on Will. The way his mouth was upturned in a snarl, how his nostrils were flaring, how his fists were bunching and unbunching, Mike could tell that Troy was seconds away from throwing a punch. And if past experience said anything, he was most definitely throwing disgusting insults at Will.

Mike hand collided with Troy's shoulder and he moved his feet out of the way of two sets of falling books.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Mike spat.

"Just a science experiment. I thought you geeks would be happy about that. I was just asking your little Fairy Boy if he actually has wings. I wanna break his back open to see for myself," he sneered.

"You swore you'd shut your mouth Troy."

Troy wagged his eyebrows. "I promised I wouldn't tell anyone, not that I wouldn't have my fun with the freak."

"Shut up," Mike's fingernails were digging into his palms from how hard he was clenching his fists, but he ignored it.

"Why? Because it's true? Because your bestest buddy is a dirty fucking faggot and there's nothing you can do about it?"

"Shut up Troy," he said from between gritted teeth.

"Or maybe you like it. Is that it Wheeler, you a fudge packer too? Bet all your friends are, makes sense why they'd hang out with you shitdicks."

"Don't think we won't send El to beat your ass."

Troy laughed. "Hey, I'm not breaking any agreement. Where's the honor in unleashing your pet when I haven't done anything?"

Mike took one look over at Will and his self-control evaporated. The fear behind his eyes and the ghostly pale tone of his skin was all it took for him to snap. Mike placed his hands on either shoulder and shoved Troy backwards full-force. The bully stumbled against the locked door of the janitor's closet, and Mike took the opportunity to press his forearm against Troy's windpipe.

Unfortunately, Mike wasn't half as strong as Dustin, and when Troy got his bearings he pushed the boy off him as if he were fighting a rag doll. Another shove and Mike was on the ground, flat on his back. But he wasn't new to this game, and he was much quicker to a plan than his opponent was. He rolled onto his side and slammed his weight backwards into Troy's ankle, letting the larger boy's own forward momentum take him to the ground. Mike was vaguely aware of his friend yelling something, but he was too angry to figure out exactly what it was. With his enemy on the ground as well, Mike lunged forward and on top of Troy, using his perch to deliver a swift elbow to the nose. He wasn't sure if the satisfying *crunch* it made meant it was broken, but the stream of blood was a good indication.

He only got to enjoy it for second though, because a blow to the jaw knocked him down from his leverage point and suddenly Troy was the one on top, and Mike knew it was over. He'd seen how it played out when Billy got the upper hand on Steve all those years ago. He knew his limitations, and he was fully aware that he was no match for Troy. The last thing Mike saw before squeezing his eyes shut was Troy's maniacal grin, his bruised fist raised high in the air. He wondered how many punches it would be until he lost consciousness.

Mike braced for impact, but it never came. He cracked his eyes open and saw two teachers hauling a struggling Troy down the hallway and a third one walking towards him. As he returned back from his world of anger, Mike took in the crowd that had formed, and the pale-faced boy standing right at the front of it. There were tears-streaks all down Will's face that he wasn't even trying to wipe away. Mike was too disoriented to be sure, but he thought his friend was trembling where he stood. Mike opened his mouth to say something, but he was cut off by the teacher looping his arms under his shoulders and lifting him up, dragging him off to God-knows-where.

~~~

Mike wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting alone in the vice principal's office, but it had to be getting to the end of the class period by this point. He didn't quite understand what was taking them so long; if they were going to suspend him, they should just do it already. But maybe making him suffer was supposed to be part of the punishment.

Just when he was starting to think that administration had forgotten about him, a stout, red-faced man waddled into the room.

“Michael, how are we doing?”

Mike pulled the dripping wet ice pack from his face. “I've had better



days, Mr. Pershing.”

The vice principal made his way around the old wooden desk and eased himself into his creaking seat. “Well, I don't know about that. You've gotten quite lucky today, son.”

“How so?” Mike asked.

“It seems as if no one in the entirety of that jam-packed hallway saw anything other than you tripping and accidentally hitting Troy's nose, causing him to go off on you. Now, the way Troy tells it, things didn't happen quite like that. He paints a picture that quite frankly, I find much more believable.” Mr. Pershing took his wide-rimmed glasses off to rub at his eyes. “However, the word of a troublemaker with a history of lying to the school doesn't exactly hold up well against a crowd of witnesses with identical stories, and we have no proof of any wrongdoing on your behalf.”

Mike could hardly believe his ears. “So...what does that mean?”

“That means you're free to go, against my better judgment. However, if you end up in here again, don't expect things to be so easy.”

“T-thank you,” he stuttered.

“You can thank me by staying out of trouble, and getting the hell out of my office.”

Mike's eyebrows shot up, but he silently nodded and did as he was told. On the way out of the administration hallway, he craned his neck around the corner of the attendance room and smiled. He'd managed to miss all of Spanish class, meaning it was straight to lunch. At least something good had come out of all this.

“What happened?”

Mike jumped at the sudden sound of a voice right next to him. He whipped his head around and sighed. “Jesus El, we've talked about this. You gotta warn people before you're right next to them.”

“Sorry,” she said with a wave of her hand. “What happened to your face?”

He pressed the useless ice pack to his face as they kept walking. "I got in a fight with Troy. I'll tell you all about it when we sit down with the everyone else."

Eleven nodded and blew a loose strand of hair from her eyes. "Are you in trouble?"

"No actually, just got out of a meeting saying I'm not." As he gestured behind him, a thought occurred to him. "Hey, what are you doing over here anyway? Aren't you supposed to be in English or something?"

She shrugged. "Supposed to be."

"Are you skipping?"

"I wish," El sighed in defeat. "They pulled me in the office to say I am on academic probation."

Mike tried to make eye contact, but her gaze was glued on the floor. "Academic probation? What the hell does that mean? I've never even heard of that before."

"It means a lot of stupid things, but the worst is lunch."

The boy cocked his head to the side. "Lunch? What do you mean?"

"After today, I have to eat my lunch in detention hall while they give me remedial lessons."

"Shit."

"Yes. Shit."

Mike bit his lip. The party had worked so hard to arrange things so they all had the same lunch hour. Lucas had signed up for a math class that was way too easy for him, Dustin was in a composition class that was way too hard for him, and Will ended up in ceramics instead of drawing – all to make this work. It was easily the best part of everyone's day, getting to step back and just be in their own comfort zone again.

"I'm sorry El, that sucks. Everyone's gonna be so bummed."

"Don't tell them."

"What?"

"Please," Eleven begged, finally looking over at her friend. "Today is my last day at the table, probably for a long time. I want it to be normal. Tell them tomorrow."

Mike thought for a minute before he gave in and nodded. "I guess that makes sense."

The two were almost to the cafeteria when the bell rang. They hurried into the line to get their food before the onslaught of ravenous students stampeded in, and they managed to get into their seats before the rest of the party arrived. Just as Mike moved to start in on his "meat loaf," Max slid into her usual seat across from him. He smiled at her; she'd been weirdly gone last Friday and he was glad to see her back.

"Shit, the rumors are true," Max said, her eyes widening as she stared at the fresh bruise on Mike's face.

"Of course everyone already knows," Mike said.

"Um, obviously. Did you really break Troy's nose?"

He bit his lip and pushed his wheat roll around. "I don't know, it sounded like I at least fractured it, but I don't know if I had enough force to actually cause a break."

Max let out a low whistle. "Damn Michael, and I thought she was supposed to be our resident badass," she grinned, gesturing to El.

"Fuck dude," came Lucas's voice as the boy approached the table. "I didn't know your face could get any uglier."

"Ha ha, very funny."

"Seriously, what a way to start a Monday. You know you're gonna have to explain to your parents why your face is all puffy like that,"

Dustin added, only a few steps behind Lucas.

"I have makeup that should be the right color for you. I can teach you how to cover it up," Max offered. El's head snapped to look at the other girl, her eyes wide and hopeful. Max just chuckled. "Yeah, I can teach you makeup too if you want."

"Oh, cool. With Mike in makeup we'll finally have the same number of guys and girls in the group," Lucas chimed in as he waggled his eyebrows.

"Shut up. Thanks Max, that'd be nice. After school today?"

"What is it you're doing after school?" Will asked, just now settling in to his spot with the sack lunch he'd retrieved from his locker.

"He's going to the salon with the other ladies," Lucas said with a shit-eating grin.

Will's eyebrows shot up, but Mike just waved a hand and shook his head minutely. "Are you guys actually going to go get your lunch, or just sit here making the same joke again and again?" Mike asked in exasperation.

"Good point, but afterwards you're explaining what the hell happened with Troy," Lucas stood up with Dustin, but when Max didn't rise as well, he looked at her curiously. "You coming?"

"No, actually," she said as she gestured at Will, who was pulling a second sandwich and chip bag from his mostly unpacked lunch box.

The two guys left, Will gave Max's food to her, and Mike shifted under the glance of his best friend.

"So...did it work?" Will asked.

"Did what work?"

"Are you in trouble?"

Mike squinted. "I'm confused. I'm actually not in any trouble, but how'd you know that?"

Will grinned through his bite of turkey sandwich. "Because I convinced the people that saw to say you were innocent. I told them what the official story was while the teachers were busy hauling you two hooligans off."

Mike's jaw dropped. "That was you?"

"Damn Byers, nice going," Max said as El nodded along.

Will looked over at the girls and smiled before dropping his voice, fixing Mike with a hard stare. "Yeah, it was me, but I don't want to have to do it again. Seriously, going after him was a dumb move."

"What?" Mike hissed. "I was just supposed to let him terrorize you?"

"Yes. I'm used to it, it's fine."

"The look on your face was not *fine*. I can't stand you being treated like that."

"Well you're going to have to if you don't want to get your ass beat too. And besides," Will hesitated and nodded in the direction of the girls as a reminder that they weren't actually alone. "I don't think it helped you to cut in during that particular subject matter. Troy notices more than you give him credit for."

Mike opened his mouth before closing it again. Shit. Will was right. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought about that before he'd pushed the dickwad. He'd just been so angry, it didn't seem like a choice in his mind. "We'll talk later," Will mouthed and turned back to the girls.

They weren't very far into a conversation about possible new campaigns when Dustin and Lucas returned.

"So spill, Wheeler. What the hell happened?" Dustin asked with unparalleled enthusiasm for the soggy chunk of meat on his tray.

"Yeah! Did you karate chop his face? Did you roundhouse kick his nose in?" Lucas asked excitedly.

Mike chuckled. "It really wasn't that exciting, I promise."

“Ooh, I bet you did that thing from the movies where you like, run up a wall and rebound off to tackle them,” Lucas said, miming a WWE style take-down.

“If you'd be quiet, I could tell you what I actually–”

Lucas grinned ear-to-ear. “No! I bet you snuck up behind him and pounced on his back, like in that one episode of– ”

“Max, do it,” Will suddenly cut in.

Mike was about to ask what the hell that was supposed to mean when Max leaned over, grabbed Lucas's face, and pulled him in for a big kiss. The whole table went silent, and then Will and Max were doubled over laughing.

“What the actual hell?” Dustin coughed through a mouth full of food.

“We decided whenever this one won't shut up, all I have to do is kiss him,” Max explained.

“It did work,” El said with an approving nod.

Lucas mumbled something at his girlfriend, and Mike could've sworn that he was blushing. Max shoved into him, but the way her eyes crinkled up in the corners was a blaring announcement of her affection. Mike had never really understood it when people told him his eyes betrayed his feelings, but watching Lucas and Max in that moment made all the pieces fall into place. He'd apologized to the redhead a long time ago for being so hostile towards her in the very beginning, but he felt the overwhelming urge to do it again. Not only was she a seamless addition to the group, she was a light in the lives of Lucas, El, and Will especially.

Mike was brought back down to earth by a loud clearing of a throat from his left, and he reluctantly dove into the story, glossing over exactly what Troy was giving Will shit about. The party reveled in it for a good fifteen minutes before the conversation diverted into Dustin's elaborate plan to get Judy Miller to make out with him. As the warning bell rang and his friends left the table one by one, Mike felt a pang in his chest remembering that it was El's last lunch with

them for the foreseeable future. He squeezed her hand as she walked by, and suddenly it was just Will and him left gathering their stuff.

“Hey Mike?” Will called softly.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for sticking up for me today, even if it was a massively dumb move.”

Mike shrugged. “Anytime. I mean that.”

“Ugh, please don't. I prefer your face when it isn't all puffy and swollen.”

“I knew you only liked me for my devilish good looks.”

Will snorted and rolled his eyes. “Speaking of my liking you, I have something for you.” The boy unzipped the front pocket of the backpack he'd just lifted from under his seat. He pulled out a folded piece of paper and slid it over. “This was gonna be for after school, but it looks like you have a makeup lesson. I wanted to give you a real one, but I figured a drawing was less conspicuous. And it lasts longer anyways.”

Mike checked over his shoulder before reaching out and picking up the paper he recognized as one from Will's nicest sketch book. He unfolded it slowly and gasped when he took it in, nearly dropping the delicate drawing in the process. It was a full-page illustration complete with shading and shadowing and a bunch of artistic techniques Mike remembered Will excitedly babbling about but never truly understood. The center focus was a bouquet of pink petunias, unevenly cut with leaves still intact. The flowers were held by a hand belonging to someone off page, and it looked as if they were being given to another out-of-frame person. Mike looked a bit more closely and noticed the hand giving the flowers seemed to be wearing what looked like Will's favorite brown button-up, and the hand receiving them had Mike's own thumb scar from the time he tried to teach Eleven how to cook. Below the image, written in cursive so beautiful it bordered on calligraphy, were the words *Soft but Strong*, the exact phrase Mike had used to describe his love for the color pink months

ago at the homecoming dance.

He took a deep breath to stifle the unexpected tears burning behind his eyes. God, he couldn't have asked for a better.... whatever they were to each other. They hadn't figured out a word to describe what was going on, but in that moment he didn't care. Mike looked up to thank Will, but he discovered he was alone. He looked back at the drawing and bit his lip. This must've taken Will weeks, if not longer. He didn't have a mirror, but Mike would have bet everything he owned that he was wearing that dumb, head-over-heels puppy dog look. And in that moment, standing alone in the cafeteria, he ignored the ever-present fear swirling in the back of his mind and let himself enjoy being hopelessly enchanted by Will Byers.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Huge shout out to sweetenoughandfaraway for beta reading this chapter and giving me some AMAZING suggestions for how to improve it.



## 4. The Calm Before the Storm

Last period Algebra was Eleven's favorite class for several reasons. First off, it was the only class she was almost on grade-level in. Mathematics was one of the only things Papa sat down to teach her, and all the kids in this school needed the vocabulary words explained, not just her. Secondly, the desks were way too close together, and El was blessed to have Dustin seated directly to her right. They were constantly whispering or passing notes. She might not spend a lot of time with Dustin outside class or with the group, but he could make her laugh like no one else could.

The third reason she loved Algebra was that Friday's newsletter was given out in last period. Everyone else took the paper as a joke, only looking at the lunch menu, but El read every word. PTA meetings, policy changes, and student events were fascinating to her; it seemed like every newsletter taught her something that everyone just assumed she knew already.

It was during one of these Friday distributions that El got her charge of motivation. She was reading through the Student News section as the familiar buzz of generic teen gossip swirled around her. There was a whole column devoted to clubs and organizations that were looking for new members for the upcoming semester. A lot of them were things like Spanish club or science decathlon – the type of things that sounded like more homework she wouldn't fully grasp. And then she saw it. An opening that would be absolutely perfect for her; El's stomach flipped with excitement just thinking about it. She pushed the paper onto Dustin's desk.

“Top of the page on the right. Read it.”

The boy's eyes scanned the page and looked back at her. “For you or for me?”

“Me.”

Dustin broke out into a massive smile that reached all the way to his eyes. “Good, that's what I was hoping. Honestly you'd be fantastic, you should totally go for it.”

El imagined what it would be like to get that rush, to be able to be how she wanted without people judging her. She was lost in the fantasy for a few moments before a harsh reality came crashing down on her. She rubbed her hand against her jaw. "I can't."

"Why's that?"

"Academic probation says no after school activities until my grades come up."

He pursed his lips and nodded in sympathy. "I'm sorry, that sucks man. How much do they have to improve for you to be off probation?"

The girl's forehead crinkled as she tried to remember exactly what it was. "My GPA has to be at least a two-point-two-five I think."

"Okay, that's doable! What's it at right now?"

"One-point-one," she muttered into her chest.

Dustin's eyes widened in surprise, but El could see him try to cover it quickly. "We can do that! We still have a month and a half left before the end of the semester, and finals count for a huge part of your grade. We'll just have to buckle down and work a little harder."

El had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. It had been three weeks since the party found out she was on probation, and they all reacted like the astounding beams of light they were. Her Wednesday night study sessions with Mike had turned into every day hang outs, each of her friends taking a different day of the week. They all helped her with whatever she was most confused about that day, but they had taken it upon themselves to each pick a class of Eleven's to know inside and out in case she had more in-depth questions. Dustin's specialization class, for example, was Algebra because he took it with her anyway.

"How do I work harder? I work during lunch, in my study hall, and every afternoon. I'm hopeless," she sighed and rested her head in her arms on the desk.

"Hey now, you're way closer to being caught up than you think. You

learn quicker than the school teaches, which means you're always making progress," Dustin reached over and ruffled her hair, which she met with a scowl.

"I have to double my GPA in six weeks."

"Oh stop grumbling. The others will agree with me and you know it."

El bit her lip and lifted her head from her arms. "Don't tell them about what I want to do. I don't want them knowing about the plan if I fail."

Dustin threw his arms up. "Now how is that motivating?"

"Please?" she begged with a loud exhale.

"Fine! But it's gonna work out. God, it's gonna be so cool. I promise."

"Shut up," she grumbled, but she couldn't help the smile that slipped onto her face.

"There she is," he said.

~~~

Not an hour had passed before Eleven was settled down on the Byers' couch with her World History book laid open in front of her. Technically speaking, Fridays were Max's day to help El with her homework, but since the girls always met at Will's house, Max and Will Days had morphed into Max-And-Will Days. Eleven wasn't entirely sure why the other girl was always at the Byers house nowadays, but everyone seemed happier this way, so who was she to snoop around in things she wasn't a part of. Out of pure curiosity, she had asked Mike if Max and Will were dating now, but her friend just

burst out laughing and assured her that no, that wasn't what was happening at all. People confused El.

Not as much as school confused her, though. "How the hell is Q-I-N pronounced 'chin'?"

Max chuckled as Will rubbed at his head. "I don't know, it just is. But we need to focus on their dynasty, not their pronunciation," he said.

"I think it's dumb that I even have to learn this. I need help figuring out how the world works right now, I shouldn't have to figure out how it was four thousand years ago too."

The redhead nodded in sympathy. "I agree, but we gotta do what we gotta do. When's the test over this stuff?"

"A week from Monday."

"A week from Monday?! Why are we studying it then? If you're caught up on the assignments before that, why are you stressing?" Will asked, a smile on his face and in his tone.

El thought of the Student Activities section of the Friday handout and bit her lip. "I don't know. I just am."

"If she wants to be a work horse, let her be a work horse dude," Max said, extending her leg across El's lap to nudge Will's cheek. He made a face and batted her away.

"Come on now. You kids need a break every once in a while," Mrs. Byers' voice rang out from the doorway as she approached the cluster of teens on her sofa. "You all like the peanut butter cookies, right? I can never remember who eats what with you guys."

Eleven pushed the textbook out of her lap to be the first hand to reach the plate and snatch the biggest cookie off the top. The sound of school supplies hitting the floor in the rush for the warm food made all four of them laugh.

"I'll take that as a yes then."

"Thank you Mrs. Byers," the guests called in unison.

“Yeah, thanks Mom.”

The woman waved her hand dismissively as she took a cookie for herself and sat down in the chair across from them. “Don't thank me, I just microwaved what we still had around from yesterday.”

“Hop says microwaves are God's gift to mankind,” El said, crumbs spilling from her lips.

Joyce chortled. “That's Hopper for ya. How're things going, by the way? With him, at home, at school?”

“Really good Mrs. Byers, thank you. I like high school.”

“That makes one of us,” Will groaned, to which Max nodded.

“And what does that mean?” Joyce asked.

“Nothing really. It's just that El can't eat lunch with us anymore and Troy's back from his suspension and I almost die of boredom in bio every day,” Max ranted as she grabbed a second cookie.

El felt a warm swelling inside her chest. Growing up she'd always gotten the idea that her life wasn't normal, but she'd never guessed how wonderful the normalcy would feel.

“And how're things at home, Maxie?”

She rolled her eyes. “Same as they were yesterday Mrs. Byers. I'm here more than I'm home anyway, you know pretty much everything I do outside school.”

“Just checking,” the woman hummed as she got up, leaving the cookie tray behind her.

And so continued the afternoon for half of the party; eating, studying, and laughing made up the next three hours of their lives. El reveled in every last moment of it, smiling at even the dumbest things. She had no way of knowing that the other two kids were feeling just as giddy, just as full of the light happiness of normal experiences for once in their lives.

None of them had any way of knowing that this would be the last moment of group peace for a long time.

Notes for the Chapter:

Shit's about to go down, so strap in guys.

5. The Kiss

The following Monday had everyone in the town of Hawkins in a fantastic mood. After several weeks of biting cold, there was finally a release into a short burst of unseasonable warmth and sun. It had no real right to be 69 degrees in mid-November, but such is flaky Indiana climate.

All throughout the school day Will heard the people around him buzzing about what they were going to do that afternoon – even the teachers seemed impatient to get class over and done with. Dustin and El wouldn't stop grumbling about having to study together until Mike finally suggested they do it outside in a park or something.

Despite the cabin fever, the whole day felt drifty and light until Will eventually found himself at the bike racks surrounded by his friends without having paid much attention to how he'd gotten there. He was bent over to undo the chain from around his front wheel when a tap on the shoulder distracted him from the party's general gossip about the newest arcade game. Will straightened up to see Lucas standing in front of him gesturing for him to come to the side. The smaller boy cocked an eyebrow but followed as he racked his brain for a subject that would be between just the two of them.

When they were a good five paces away from the rest, Lucas spoke in a hushed tone. “Hey dude. We haven't talked in a little bit and I was wondering how things have been with Max at your place?”

Ohhhh, that made sense. “She's been good. She's finally started taking food without asking for every little thing, so I think she's getting more at home.”

Lucas hummed and nodded, a crease formed on his forehead. “Good, good. Has she talked about how things are with Neil and her mom?”

Will began to speak before he realized he wasn't sure of the answer. He looked over and chuckled at the sight of Max instructing El, Mike, and Dustin how to braid, letting each of them take a big section of her hair. “I dunno man. I don't think she's really brought it up a whole lot, she's at my house so much. But you've seen how it is – my

mom treats her like the daughter she never had.”

Lucas tore his eyes away from his girlfriend as his smile faded. “Does anyone else know how bad things are at her house?”

“I don't think she's told anyone, but I bet Mike has put some of the pieces together by now.”

The taller boy nodded solemnly. “That's fair.”

“It'll be fine dude. Max is a smart girl, if something's going on she'll talk to you. Or me, or my mom, or Hop, or someone. Is there a reason you're asking?” Will asked.

“No, not really, I just worry. I think she downplays things, makes them seem better than they are,” Lucas fiddled with the end of his backpack strap and looked down.

“I'll see if I can ask her casually about it, check in with her,” Will reached up and patted his friend's shoulder.

After a brief pause, Lucas looked Will right in the eyes. “Hey dude?”

“Yeah?”

“Is anything going on between you two? Like, do you have feelings for her?”

Will scanned his friend's expression and was surprised to find a hard sort of resentment there. How long had Lucas been sitting on this? “Absolutely not.”

Lucas looked dubious. “Really?”

“I promise. She's like a sister. I literally help her decide what to wear on dates with you.”

His friend chuckled. “No freaking way.”

“It's true,” Will said through a smile. “The jacket she's gonna wear tonight is really nice. You're welcome.”

Lucas reached over and shoved him, but it was clear to Will that there was no malice in it. The two meandered back to the rest of the group and began trying to untangle the absolute disaster that was Max's new "braids," a process that would prove to take a good five minutes. Afterwards they all set off on their different ways, promising to get there before first period the next day to review for the geography test they all had. It sounded like a fun, and Will was actually looking forward to it as he left the parking lot that day.

~~~

Will wasn't entirely awake, but he definitely wasn't asleep either. He knew exactly where he was and what was happening with his physical body – he could smell the woody air and feel the warmth enveloping his body. He was acutely aware of the gentle fingertips tracing a slow path from the crown of his head, past his ear, and down to his jaw only to start all over again.

He was taking that all in and savoring every last bit of it, but his thoughts weren't quite there with him. In a dream-like immersive way, Will's mind was flitting through a highlight reel of the last few months of his life. *Carving sloppy pumpkins left-handed with his friends and having his mom display them all proudly on the porch. Mike's hand on his back, guiding him over a slick patch of broken pavement. Max's triumphant 'I told you so' when they actually finished the gigantic Star Wars marathon. Slow dancing in the privacy of his room to the sound of his fuzzy boombox. El's face when the details of the Silk Road finally stuck in her head.* Apart from his run-ins with the Upside Down, his father's absence, and the more than occasional bullying, Will had never had a bad life. He had friends, a family, stability. But the past year had really been the best of his life, and he was letting all of that really wash over him for the first time.

Eventually he forced his heavy eyelids open to smile up at his friend.

"Hey there sleepy head, welcome back to the land of the living," Mike said warmly.

"Mmm, 'wasn't sleeping," he mumbled, blinking to clear his head.

"Sure you weren't."

"Shut up."

Mike let out a chuckle that Will could feel reverberate in his belly. "You only say that when I'm right," Mike teased and pressed a firm kiss to the top of Will's head.

"Mmm, shut up."

Will rolled in slightly more and nuzzled deeper into Mike's shoulder, and in turn he felt Mike's arm tighten in around his waist where they were lying down.

"Do you believe in god?"

Will's head snapped up to look at his friend. "Where did that come from?"

"I was just wondering if there is a god, if he carved out this little ten-foot clearing in the woods to be this peaceful on purpose, or if it just happened naturally."

"Michael Wheeler, philosopher. Who knew."

Mike looked down at him and the way his eyes glimmered made Will inhale deeply. They stayed there on the blanket they'd laid out for an immeasurable amount of time, sometimes talking, sometimes playing footsie, and sometimes just looking at each other. Will had seen his friend in a lot of different situations feeling a lot of different things, but this was the first time he could remember that Mike looked peaceful, almost serene. Like most of his friend's emotions, Will found it infectious.

As the sun started shifting lower in the sky, both boys knew they had to be going. Mrs. Byers didn't know her son was going to be out, and if she got home before he did she would worry. Eventually Will sighed and pushed himself to standing, and the boys folded up the blanket and grabbed their backpacks. Will was about to start out towards the main path when Mike caught his arm.

“Wait.”

Will turned. “What's up man?”

He watched as Mike shifted his weight back and forth between his feet. “I just– you make me feel safe, you know that?”

The smaller boy looked up and was surprised to see a soft sort of determination in his friend's eyes. “Okay? I mean, thanks. You make me feel safe too.”

Mike reached out a noticeably shaking hand and tucked a bit of stray hair behind Will's ear. He chewed on his lip and shuffled a bit closer to the boy. “Can I...?”

Will could feel his pulse quicken. Oh. That's what this was. “Yeah. Are you sure you want to...” he swallowed.

“Yeah. I'm sure.”

And then Mike was cupping his face and closing his eyes and Will thought his heart might pound out of his throat. And then they were there. Will had imagined how his best friend's lips would feel a thousand times, and he had hoped they would be soft and warm and gentle. And they were all those things, but they were more than that too. The slow shifting against his own mouth felt so natural, as intuitive as breathing. Will was sure that the world around them could be on fire and he wouldn't have noticed.

After a moment Mike pulled back, surveying his friend's face. “Wow. I...wow.”

Will chuckled nervously. “Yeah. Wow.”

“I think it's gonna be a lot harder to hide my dumb puppy dog look now that I know what that feels like.”

Will felt his chest swell. “You never were very good at hiding things.”

He moved to start walking again before he stopped himself. Will wrapped his arms around Mike's waist in a hug, burying his face in his friend's chest. Standing like this, he was a full head shorter than

Mike, but he liked it that way. He felt like Mike could protect him from anything. He looked straight up when he felt his hair being ruffled.

“You're cute.”

“Shut up,” Will quipped, unable to hide his blush.

The series of events that followed took up the span of about eight seconds, but they felt like a century. Mike leaned down to kiss him again, and Will felt his lips brush his own for only an instant – because he was able to register a loud choking. At first he thought it was Mike, but with a sinking horror he realized it couldn't have been, not without his lips moving. He looked around frantically for a moment before his eyes froze.

Lucas and Max were standing at the edge of the clearing, both wide-eyed and open-mouthed. All four teens were stuck in place for a fraction of a second before all hell broke loose. Max started babbling incoherently. Mike started swaying unsteadily. Will started to stutter something, he didn't even know what. But Lucas' snarl cut through all of the confusion, and the one word he muttered resounded like it had been shrieked.

*“Disgusting.”*

And then Lucas was stalking away, Max was scampering after him, and Will was calling for him to wait, let them explain. He didn't stop calling out until he realized that Mike was curled on his knees, retching the contents of his stomach on the ground as his whole body trembled. Not knowing what to do, Will crouched and rested a hand against Mike's back.

Numb. This was what complete numbness felt like.

Will would have preferred a world on fire.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So...don't hold back. Tell me everything you thought of it.

## 6. The Fallout

There's a special sort of chest-ripping agony that's almost always reserved for the kind of events that involve police. Watching your grandmother have a heart attack or seeing your father get hauled off to jail is typically the caliber of disaster it takes to release the sort of gut-twisting, all encompassing pain and fear that can cripple a man. Mike Wheeler experienced that misery two separate times in his teen years. The first was when he witnessed what he thought was his best friend's dead body removed from the quarry. The second was moments after kissing that best friend for the first time.

Mike didn't actually mind the vomiting, because the painful retching gave him something to focus his energy on. It was when his heaving subsided that he realized he had to find a way to continue living. The trembling boy wiped his mouth, rubbed at his running nose, and closed his eyes. Five minutes ago, the only person in the world that knew about him was Will. Sure, Dustin had put the pieces together, but Mike had never actually said anything to confirm it. This was supposed to be a glowing secret, a private joy shielded from the rest of the world. But now Lucas and Max knew, and there was no denying it, no way to convince them they'd misinterpreted things.

Right then, hunched over and shaking in the middle of the woods, everything became real to Mike. This wasn't just a puppy-love experiment with a boy he'd known for a fact was queer before he took the risk. This was a disgusting perversion that could get him kicked out of his house, shunned from school, or fucking murdered. All the pent-up fear and doubt that resided in the back of his mind came spilling forward. How the hell had he managed to ruin his entire life before his voice even finished dropping? He'd been a careless idiot. After everything he'd been through it'd make sense for him to value self-preservation, but apparently he didn't. As he spat out the last bit of vomit, Mike realized that that had to change.

"Get your hand off of me."

"W-what?"

Mike shrugged Will's gently cupped hand off his shoulder as he tried

to steady his voice. "Don't touch me."

The smaller boy nodded as his arm dropped. "Try to breathe, okay?"

He stood up and stalked over to where he'd left his backpack and squatted to stuff his scattered belongings inside. "Don't tell me to fucking breathe."

"C'mon man, we need to keep it together. Let's think about this. We can talk to Lucas, try to get him to—"

"To what, Will? To change his mind? To unsee what he saw? To stop being repulsed by us?" Mike straightened up and spun around. "Cause that's not gonna happen. This isn't just gonna go away, it won't work itself out. Don't you get that? We're screwed. We decided to be dumbasses and now we're paying for it."

Will slowly closed his mouth from where it hung half-open. "Calm down Mike. We need to figure out what we're going to do," he said in a small voice.

"Oh my god Will, are you really that naive? There's nothing we *can* do!"

It was like a switch had flipped. The smaller boy's eyes hardened as the last bit of understanding drained from his face. "Do you think I don't realize how bad this is? Do you think I'm not freaked out too? Because I am, Mike. I'm scared shitless. Not even three months ago I was sitting on the back stairs at the arcade begging you not to hate me. Not even three weeks ago I had to stare into Troy's eyes and hope to god he wouldn't decide to shout my secret. I'm terrified too, but at least I have it together enough to try to be functional for you."

Looking at the person he cared most about in the world, something snapped inside Mike. A swell of emotion that he didn't even know was there came flooding over him. "Well I'm not like you, okay?! I don't have to be like this!" He exhaled harshly. "I wasn't faking it with El, I really loved her. I can like girls. Being like this, being with you, this is a *choice* for me. I can be normal if I want. I'm not you, everyone hasn't always assumed I'm queer." Mike was too angry to do anything about the hot tears rolling down his cheeks. "You *have* to be

a faggot. I don't."

And there it was. Will Byers' signature defensive stance: spine straight, jaw hard, unblinking eye contact. Mike had never been on the receiving end of it, and he suddenly understood why it stopped people picking on Will as much. That rough glare cut straight through him and stung worse than a punch ever could. He was over a head taller than Will and practically twice his weight, but standing there the older boy felt like he was three feet tall.

Will swallowed. "I see then. Bye Mike."

As his friend turned on his heel, Mike sighed and bit his lip. "C'mon, let me bike you home. We'll make it quick."

"No."

"I'm not just leaving you here dude."

Will paused, turning his head over his shoulder. "I said *no*, Mike. I'm fine. Leave it."

As the figure of his friend vanished through the brush, the Wheeler boy's mouth hung open. Will hadn't biked home alone since his disappearance. At first it was because Mrs. Byers wouldn't let him, but eventually the party realized that it made Will uncomfortable too. In truth it made them all uneasy. It was a rule that no matter what happened, no matter how tired or angry or sick you were, you made sure Will had someone to take him home.

Mike shook his head and started jogging towards the path, determined to talk some sense into the boy, or at the very least trail him home from half a block away. When he broke out onto the gravel path, he saw nothing but his own bike. In the still nature, he heard the sounds of rock crunching under tires.

---

The first thing to break the ten minute silence was the sound of pebbles being disturbed by a speeding bike, most likely on the side path not twenty feet away from the walking couple. As the sound faded in front of them, Lucas was the second thing to break the silence.

“Did you know?”

Max stopped shuffling only for a moment. “What?”

“Did Will tell you they're fags now?” Lucas looked over at his girlfriend, who was sporting her familiar brow furrowed, hands-in-pockets pensive look.

“No. I didn't know.”

The boy nodded. “Where are you gonna go?”

“You know, you're gonna have to start clarifying your questions the first time you ask them.”

“When things get bad with Neil and your mom, are you going to go to El's or Dustin's? You're closer with El, but being around Hopper all the time might get him suspicious,” Lucas mused, biting his lip.

“Uh, I'll probably go to Will's?”

Now Lucas stopped walking. “What?”

Max stopped as well and turned around. “What do you mean 'what?'”

The boy looked around, acutely aware that they were getting to the point where hiking trails met road, and that the trees often gave off an echo in this area. He closed the gap in between them and placed a gentle hand on his girlfriend's hip. “Listen, I don't know how it was out in California, but this is Hawkins. Being seen with fudgepackers,”



he shuddered, "is dangerous. What they're doing is fucking repulsive, and if they're dumb enough to make out in a forest, they're gonna get caught again."

"We make out in the forest," Max raised her eyebrows.

"It's different. How'd they even know about the tree opening anyway?"

She broke eye contact with him. "I may have told Will about it."

"Are you kidding me right now?" Lucas rubbed at his face. "Whatever, that's not the point. The point is that nothing's the same anymore. We have enough on our plates right now. People at school, your parents, reacting to every sound as if it's a monster even after two years. We can't add to that."

Max was squinting at him, almost like she was trying to read a hidden message on his face. "Are you serious?" she asked quietly after a beat of silence.

Jesus, how was she not understanding this? "It's not our fault they decided to be fairy faggots. It's not our job to stay around for the slaughter." Lucas paled at a thought. "Fuck, I can't believe I've changed in front of them. I'm lucky one of them didn't make a pass at me. God."

Lucas dropped his hold from Max's hip to her hand and gave it a quick squeeze. He began to walk forward again, but she didn't budge.

"C'mon dude, we gotta get you home. I don't wanna give your parents an excuse to flip out."

The two paused for a moment, staring at each other in the center of the pathway. After several moments of the silence stretching on, Max nodded slowly. Something had changed behind her eyes, but Lucas couldn't quite figure out what it was. She took his hand and they kept walking.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

When I say shit's gonna go down, I mean it. Also, I've

decided that with every chapter you get an end note with a fun fact of how the story's changed since it's original plot outline, just because I feel like it.

This chapter's fact: Originally, Mike's "I love the color pink," confession at the homecoming dance was supposed to be "last summer I kissed a boy at camp." But I decided to tone it down and completely reshape Mike's internal struggle story arch.

## 7. The Absences

Dustin set his tray down at the table and plopped into his seat. He took a large bite from his crusty garlic bread and resigned himself to a half an hour of solitude. When he'd shown up that morning for the group study session they had planned for the geography test, he'd been surprised to find only Eleven waiting for him. He didn't mind studying with her – it was always fun and being alone gave them the chance to talk more about her grand plans for next semester – but it was an open secret that Max would be the one to do the heavy lifting with the study guide. Without her help, they'd both been pretty lost as they stumbled their way through the study guide.

He had assumed that the others just forgot about the review session they'd planned last minute (or decided to sleep through it), but when he didn't see any of them all day, he realized they weren't at school at all. Honestly Dustin was a little pissed. Four out of the six of the party being gone was way too weird to be a coincidence, which most likely meant they were off screwing around in someone's basement playing board games. He didn't quite understand the point of skipping with only two days left until Thanksgiving break, but it still sounded fun. El probably would have declined an invitation with how focused she'd been on school lately, but Dustin would have gone. He tried to think of something he'd done lately that would lead him not to be welcome to join, but he came up blank.

With El in study detention, Dustin was left alone at lunch. He wished he could put up a sign saying *I don't normally sit alone, I promise I have friends*. This complete resignation was why he almost jumped out of his skin when Lucas slid in next to him ten minutes late.

“What the fuck dude!” Dustin exclaimed, choking on his spaghetti. “Where have you been?”

“I was hanging out by my locker for a bit. I wanted to be the last one here to see if Mike and Will were still at the table.”

Dustin shook his head as he took a swig of water; that response raised a lot more questions than it answered. “They aren't here today. I assumed all four of you were off on some adventure.”

Lucas snapped his head over to look at his friend. "What do you mean, four?"

"Uh, Mike, Will, you, and Max?"

"Max is gone too?" Lucas asked.

The larger boy rubbed at his jaw. "I haven't seen her. Do you know what's going on?"

Dustin watched as the boy next to him turned his lips up in a snarl while simultaneously shifting uncomfortably. "Yeah, you could say that."

He waited for Lucas to continue, but when he didn't, Dustin prodded, "And? What the hell happened?"

"God, I don't even want to talk about it. But Max and I were on a walk yesterday when we came across the others. Together." He shivered. "*Kissing*. So yeah, I bet that's why they're not showing their faces today."

Dustin spluttered his food again. Okay, clearly this wasn't a discussion he could eat during. Lucas was looking at him with raised eyebrows, so he scrambled for something to say. "Oh. Weird."

"Weird? Dude, I just dropped the biggest bomb on you since 'monsters are real,' and all you have to say is 'weird?'"

He pursed his lips, thinking. He was a decent liar when he needed to be and he was sure he could pull off pretending this was a shock to him. But he just didn't have the energy for that, and he didn't see the point in it. "Yeah. Will accidentally let something slip a little while back, and I figured out the Mike part on my own."

Lucas blinked, squinted, and opened and reshut his mouth several times. "W-h-how, what do you mean you just *figured it out*?"

"Come on man, that boy couldn't be easier to read if his thoughts were written on his forehead," Dustin said, shrugging.

"How long have you known?"

“Oh god, I don't remember. Since the middle of September I guess?”

Lucas gaped at him. “Two months? You've known for two months and didn't think to tell me?!”

He chewed at the inside of his cheek. “Honestly I wish *I* had never found out, so why would I spread that? Besides, is it really any of our business?”

“Of course it is!”

Dustin was so surprised he had no choice but to laugh. “What are you talking about man?”

Lucas rubbed at his eyes and set his arms on the table like he was settling in to give a physics lecture. “Jesus Christ why do I have to explain this,” he muttered. “They're a liability dude. Shit like this never stay secret for long, and once they hit that ice burg, we're all going down with the ship.”

Dustin peered at his friend for a moment. “Oh my god, you're serious aren't you?”

“Yes, I am.”

He couldn't believe his ears. “So you're gonna dump two of your best friends just like that?”

“Do you think I *want* to? Do you think I'm happy about this? I've literally risked my life for them. But we're in high school now. There are whole movies and books and TV shows devoted to how much these four years are gonna suck. And we have enough working against us already, do you really think it's *smart* to add to that?”

“Do you really think it's *right* not to?”

The boys sat in silence for a minute just staring at each other. They hadn't been in a real fight in years, and back then they were passive aggressive idiots about it. He'd never gone head-to-head with Lucas like this, and Dustin didn't know the protocol. Luckily, Lucas was the first to speak again.

“Listen, this sucks. We've all been friends for forever. I'm only saying that it might be a smart idea not to be seen around them too much. It's not our fault they decided they're queer now, so it's not on us to go through hell until they finally come to their senses.”

Dustin was surprised when Lucas smiled at him, patted his hand, and stole a bite of his pasta. It was clear that in Lucas' mind the discussion was over. Dustin wasn't so settled about it, but he was afraid that if he keep pushing his friend would get riled up and forget to keep his volume under control. A rumor getting out was the last thing anybody needed right now.

He nodded as Lucas unceremoniously transitioned to a completely different topic, but Dustin's mind was buzzing at something Lucas had said. *It's not our fault they decided they're queer now.* Dustin didn't like to think about this particular subject, and he'd made that very clear. But that sentence just didn't sit right with him. *Decided.* He hadn't made a decision to like Max a few years back; it would have been a whole lot easier if he hadn't. Falling for someone wasn't a choice, was it? He was also bothered because he was pretty sure that he had said almost the exact same thing that day with Mike by the stream. *'Dude, he's queer now.'* Dustin knew he'd never been as bad as Lucas (he had to believe he'd never been that bad), but it still made him uncomfortable. Part of him saw exactly what Lucas was saying, and there was no doubt in his mind that everything would be simpler if none of this had ever happened. God damn he was torn. He missed the days before he'd been forced to deal with this stuff.

As Dustin's mind whirled with moral gray zones and Lucas' with light topics to keep things together, one subject was left hanging in the air, forgotten. Where the hell was Max?

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This chapter's fun fact: the Mike and Will kiss scene you all read was actually First Kiss Version 3.0. I had originally intended that the kiss at homecoming would be on the lips, but when I was writing it the characters didn't seem to want it to go that way. Then I'd planned for Lucas and Max to walk in on them during their first ever kiss, but my heart

wouldn't let me.

## 8. The Gay Stuff

Mike was entering his second hour of weighing the pros and cons of making himself vomit in front of his mother. He'd never puked on purpose before, but he had a sensitive enough gag reflex that he figured it couldn't be that difficult. He despised throwing up, but earlier when his mom had called to him that he was absolutely going to school tomorrow, Mike figured it was his best out. With the way he was feeling, it hadn't been hard to convince his mom he was physically sick and he ought to stay home, but it seemed she'd decided that he was certainly *not* going to miss the day before Thanksgiving break, especially because if he did he wouldn't be able to do his missed homework in his down time.

In all reality Mike knew that he'd be able to convince his dad to go easy on him, but he still forced himself to run through scenario after scenario of vomiting near his mom. It kept all the other thoughts at bay, pushing away everything he wasn't able to handle yet. He'd managed to sleep through most of the day, and although his dreams had been unpleasant, they were better than conscious thought. He knew he wouldn't be able to drift off again any time soon, but that didn't stop him from burying himself deep in his comforter. It was stupid and childish, but being covered up made it a little bit easier to block out the world and the thoughts swirling around his bedroom. It was just him, his blanket, and his puking plans.

That was until he heard a pounding at the front door. At first he just rolled over and ignored it; his mom often knocked when she was feeling too lazy to dig through her purse for her keys. When it came again after a pause, Mike groaned and poked his head out. He shifted to a seated position, peered out his window, and swore. What the hell was Dustin doing there? He didn't have the energy to leave bed, much less deal with being presentable for a friend. He retreated under his blanket and held his hands over his ears as the knocking continued.

“Michael Wheeler! Get your ass down here, I need to talk to you!”

The voice sounded ever so slightly closer than the knocking had, so Mike assumed Dustin had moved nearer to his room. He knew that



from a certain spot on the sidewalk you could see into his room through the window, and Mike had been too lazy to draw the curtains closed. He lied perfectly still and prayed his comforter wasn't in too much of a human shape right then. He held his breath for a moment as he listened, but when no more ruckus was made he exhaled and let his hands fall from his face. Good. He wasn't in the mood to play normal right then. Mike was happy to go back to the closest thing to peace and quiet he could have.

His heart almost stopped when he heard the telltale squeak of the bottom stair. What the hell? Had his dad come home early and was walking up to yell at Mike for his loud friend? He emerged from his blanket cloud again to try to listen better, but not ten seconds later his door slammed open.

“Hey there.”

“Jesus Christ, Dustin! What the actual fuck?”

The surprise visitor strolled across the room and sat down at the foot of Mike's bed, as if this were a perfectly normal interaction. “We've been friends for more than five years now, do you really think I don't know how to break into your house?”

He squinted at his friend in disbelief. “You've got to be joking.”

Dustin waved his hand. “Nope. But I'm not here to talk about my mad ninja skills. I missed you at school today.”

“Uh, yeah. I was sick.”

“Cut the bullshit, Wheeler.”

Mike bristled. “You know this isn't exactly polite, barging into my house and cursing at me.”

“I'm not here to be polite.”

Mike threw his hands up. “Why are you here?” he grunted.

Dustin closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then turned to look directly at his friend. “Tell me about gay stuff.”

Mike just about short-circuited right then and there. Where in god's green earth did that come from? He was sure he'd heard wrong. As it was, all he could do was sit there and gape.

Dustin raised his eyebrows, and when Mike didn't respond he continued. "C'mon man. I'm really trying here. I want you to tell me about you and Will and all that gay shit."

He squinted, trying to make sure it was actually his old friend sitting in front of him. "Where is this coming from?"

Dustin sighed. "I was hoping you wouldn't ask that. Lucas told me what he saw yesterday."

Mike could feel the color drain from his face. He swallowed. "Oh."

"Yeah."

"What did he say?"

Dustin broke eye contact and began paying strict attention to a loose thread on the pocket of his pants. His gaze flicked up at Mike and then back down again. "He was, you know. He was Lucas."

Mike felt his stomach sink a little further. A foolish part of him had been fostering the hope that maybe Lucas just reacted how he did in the moment, and with time he wouldn't be that bad. "Was it in front of Will?"

"What? No, Will was gone from school today. I assumed you all were together."

His eyebrows shot up. "What? What do you mean 'all?'"

"You, Will, and Max," Dustin said, confusion clear in his voice.

This was news to Mike. He could wager a guess as to why Will had skipped, but Max? His eyes stung as a thought occurred to him – maybe she was so disgusted with them she didn't even want to see their faces. Honestly it would make sense. Mike took a long breath as he tried to return himself to the numb neutrality he had achieved earlier in the day, but he was finding it harder and harder. After a

moment he realized that Dustin was looking at him expectantly.

“Oh,” was all he said.

“Yeah. But seeing Lucas act like a douche today made me think about some things, and then I thought that you and Will have had to think about these things forever, and I thought that you guys have to keep all those thoughts to yourself, never being able to tell people what you were thinking about.”

“Say 'think' one more time.”

“I'm serious Wheeler. I'm trying to talk to you about my grand epiphany, this isn't the time to criticize my use of language.”

Mike cracked what felt like the first smile in decades. He had no idea how Dustin managed to turn him from a miserable piece of shit to an almost-human within seconds, but it was a trait he'd always loved about the guy. “Sorry, you were saying?”

“I was saying that I just now realized you two don't have anyone to talk to about this. And today Lucas showed me the exact type of person I don't want to be. So lay it on me. Tell me about the gay stuff.”

Mike chuckled nervously, simultaneously amused and uncomfortable. “What do you want to know?”

“I have no idea,” Dustin declared with a smile.

He snorted. “Helpful. I dunno what to start with. I guess you might want to know that I'm not actually gay.”

“You do know that Will is a guy, right?”

“Shut the hell up,” Mike kicked his friend through the blanket. “I mean, yeah, I'm gay. But only sometimes. I like girls, too. So I guess that means I'm gay half of the time? I'm not sure. I just know that I really like Will, but I wasn't faking it with Eleven either.”

Dustin blinked slowly. “Jesus this is all too much to keep up with. But yeah, okay. I've actually been wondering about the stuff with

Eleven.” He sighed “So what's it like, being a half-gay?”

The entire conversation was absolutely bizarre for the dark-haired boy, but he knew that chances like this didn't come around every day. “Half-gay,” he muttered with a smile. “I don't know man. I guess I don't have anything else to compare it to. It feels nice to finally acknowledge something that's been there for forever, but it's also scary as shit. I miss being able to ignore it.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Yeah,” he shifted.

Dustin shrugged and pulled a weird face. “Okay. So. I'm trying here dude. I guess, uh, how're you and Will doing?”

Mike felt his gut twist. “I dunno. It's...a thing.”

“Do you not like him after all?”

He bit his lip and shook his head.

Dustin sighed and looked at his friend. “You don't have to talk about anything you don't wanna talk about, but I want you to know I'm doing my best. I don't think I can handle anything super graphic, but I wanna be here for you. You'd do the same for me with any girl I like.”

Mike didn't think he'd ever felt such a strong range of emotion in such a short time. He thought about it as he tugged on a lock of hair. In all honesty he *didn't* want to talk about it, but he didn't know if he wanted to hold it in either. Some of these feeling had been creeping up on him for a while, and now that he'd recognized them, they were clawing to get out.

Eventually he spoke. “Before yesterday it was going really well.”

Dustin pulled his legs onto the bed, crossed them in front of himself, and turned to face Mike. “What all happened?”

“We kissed for the first time. And it felt...” Mike smiled, “really nice. Like it was exactly what was supposed to happen. I really like him

dude. Like, *a lot*.” He exhaled. “But then Lucas and Max saw us, and Lucas was Lucas, and after they left I started freaking out.”

“Why'd you flip? Was it just that you didn't want Lucas to know?”

“That's the thing. I mean, obviously I didn't want them to know, and his reaction wasn't reassuring,” he sighed and rubbed his eyes. “God, that's gonna be a bitch to deal with. But it was more than just that. Until then it had all been like a dream, none of it was real. But when Lucas stared at me, I finally realized just how much this could screw up for me. And I think the doubt has always been there – thinking that things might be better if I called the whole thing off. Back out of it all and focus on being normal.”

“Does Will know you're thinking about that?” Dustin asked.

Mike let out a humorless laugh. “He does now. I said some *dumbass* things to him.”

“What'd you say?”

He shifted and looked down, shame burning at his eyes. “Just some stuff. It was bad though. This might not even be a decision I have to make, because I don't know if he'll ever forgive me.”

Dustin whistled. “That bad?”

“Pretty bad. The thought of losing him as a friend – or as a,” Mike hesitated, “whatever we are – kills me. I don't know what I'd do without him, you know? But at the same time as all that, I'm thinking maybe it was a good thing. Maybe this is me finally remembering how to protect myself, and it's better not to say sorry because then it's the end of all the craziness.”

“I gotta say, staying away from him is the smart thing to do.” Dustin commented.

Mike was expecting as much, but it didn't stop the lump from forming in his throat. “Yeah.”

“But when have you been smart?”

“What?”

Dustin smiled softly at him. “Was it the smart thing to do to go looking for Will when he disappeared? Was it the smart thing to do when we got involved with a bald chick with superpowers that could've been a Russian spy? You've never done the smart thing when it comes to your friends. You do the right thing Mike, and that's something I've always thought was really cool about you. You've been so damn happy since you and Will got together. If I have to spend every day until graduation looking at Gloom and Doom Mike, I think I might off myself,” he finished with a raise of his eyebrows.

Mike couldn't help but give a small smirk. “Easier said than done.”

“Oh I know man. I'd never have the balls to go for it,” Dustin waved his hands in a sort of emphasis. “But you've always been braver with this stuff than me.”

“Thanks.”

“It's true. This is hard as hell, but you'll figure it out. I've got your back no matter what you decide on.”

Mike had to look up at the ceiling to keep the tears from spilling down his cheeks. This was the last conversation he'd expected to have. “Thanks,” he eventually managed.

Dustin leaned over and patted his friend's knee. “Cool. Ug, enough with the touchy-feely stuff, I've had enough chick-flick moments to last a year. You wanna go on a walk, head to the arcade?”

Mike closed his eyes and shook his head, exhaustion pulling down on every inch of him. “I can't. I've gotta...I just can't.”

Dustin nodded as he stood up. “Fair enough. See you in class tomorrow?”

“Probably not.”

“Okay. Just don't wallow in here forever, 'kay? Whatever you choose, you gotta decide and go with it. No use flip-flopping on it forever,” he said as he walked towards the door.

Mike shook his head – how had he gotten so lucky? “Hey man, thanks for everything. Seriously, I don't think you get how cool you're being.”

The visitor paused and turned around in the doorway. “Don't mention it,” he winked. “Really.”

After Dustin left, Mike laid back down on his bed. Despite his marathon napping earlier, he felt more tired than he had in a long time. He had a lot of things to figure out and not a lot of time to do it in. Against his better judgment he leaned over, pulled open his bedside drawer, grabbed the piece of paper, and rested his head down again. Mike spent the next half an hour folding and unfolding it, overwhelmed by the swell of affection and fear it brought every single time. Eventually the boy did drift to sleep, and a small shift pushed the paper onto the floor. It landed face-up, exposing its message to the ceiling. *Soft but Strong*.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This chapter's fun fact: before this update, the word "gay" was (very intentionally) only used once in the entire series -- when Will is thinking about what people might think of his mannerisms.

## 9. The Naked Truth

Max took a deep breath and tugged the end of her wool hat down. It was fine. Everything was fine. She repeated that in her mind as she prepared herself – just because she knew this was the right thing to do didn't mean she wanted to actually see the fallout. She steeled herself and knocked on the door lightly. As she listened for any movement inside the house, Max shifted her weight from foot to foot out of both nervousness and cold. The young girl counted to forty-three in her head before she couldn't take it anymore and knocked louder. This time she heard a shift from inside and eventually light footsteps padded towards her. At sound of the door squeaking open, Max flashed what she hoped was a gentle smile.

“Hey,” she breathed.

“Hey! Max, w-what's up?”

“Nothing much, you?”

“About the same I guess,” Will shrugged at her and raised an eyebrow. “So do you wanna come in? Did you come here to hang out? Or like...?”

She looked down and played with the hem of her coat. “I came to apologize.”

“What?”

“I want to say I'm sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

Max met her friend's eyes, genuinely surprised to find confusion there. “For the stuff with Lucas.”

The young girl watched her friend shift, clear his throat, and false-start several sentences before finally mumbling. “You have nothing to be sorry for. Lucas is Lucas. And he barely even said anything.”

“He said enough. And after we left he said some stuff to me and I just



fucking stood there and let him go on. And the whole time I was just thinking that if it was switched, you'd stand up for me in a second. I'm sorry."

Will gave her a small smile, but Max could've sworn she saw it trembling. "Maxie, just you being here and stressing out about it so much means the world to me," he laughed humorlessly. "To be honest, the fact that you're speaking to me at all is more of a relief than you know."

Max was genuinely taken off guard by this. "Why wouldn't I be here?"

The small boy in front of her shrugged. "Because you know the things people whisper about me are true. And if that doesn't make you hate me outright, you should at least be worried about the consequences of being associated with me," he said quietly and clearly.

The redhead caught his eyes and took a step towards him. "Will, you're the best, most genuine person I've ever met. The only person who even comes close to you is your mom. I'd have to be really fucking shallow to throw that away 'cause of what people might say. And as for the actual, uh...what I saw," Max smirked and gave a casual shrug. "With this sorta thing I ask myself *what would Billy do?* and then I do the exact opposite."

She watched Will's eyes go wide and she tried to look as reassuring as possible. "Really?"

"Yes dummy, really."

He dropped his gaze to his feet and shifted. "How is this so simple for you?"

Max thought for a second and smiled when she realized the answer. "It's easy because I trust your judgment. I'm sure you've thought about this and stressed about it and generally Will-ed out a lot more than I have. So if you know that this is what you want for yourself, I trust that."

Although it looked like many tears were trying to escape Will's eyes,

only one managed to break free and roll down his cheek. The boy moved to wipe it away, but Max's hand beat him to it. When he invited her inside she tried to say that she came over to apologize, not because she needed a place to escape to, but Will insisted. When he looked at her with that child-like hope she couldn't bring herself to say no. As she crossed the threshold into the Byers' house, Max shoved her hands deep in her pockets. She knew she shouldn't have come in with how observant this family was. If she was being smart she'd make an excuse to leave and go home right then, but the familiar smell of home-cooked food and art supplies felt like gentle hands guiding her towards the couch. It had only been a week since she'd been there, but it felt like ages. In the four days since she'd walked into the clearing to see Mike and Will kissing, she'd convinced herself she might never be back here like this again. As she lowered herself into her usual spot on the sofa and winced, she realized she definitely should have waited a bit longer.

"Here, gimme your hat and coat, I'll put them up," Will offered.

"Uh, no thanks. I'm good."

"What're you talking about? Our furnace's stuck on full blast, you'll get heatstroke wearing all that."

"It's fine," she repeated.

"Don't be dumb, you're already sweating," Will laughed.

Max closed her eyes. She'd been an idiot coming here. "I don't want to take them off."

"Why?"

Max said nothing.

She felt the weight off Will sitting on the couch next to her. "Max...please take them off," he said quietly, and even with her eyes closed Max could tell he was beginning to suspect.

She took a breath. "I came here for *you*, not for me. I don't want you worrying about me."

Will put a hand on her shoulder and gave it an incredibly light squeeze. "I'm already worried. C'mon, please. For me."

Max opened her eyes and looked over at her friend. The concern etched on his face felt like a punch to the gut. She'd done nothing to deserve a friend as good as him. She wanted to argue further, but if she let herself be honest, she was exhausted in every sense of the word. She averted her eyes to the her knees and slowly lifted her winter hat off her head. Ignoring the sharp inhale she heard from Will, Max gingerly removed her jacket and set it on the armrest of the sofa.

"Max..."

"Please don't," she begged, her voice cracking.

"Don't what? Don't freak out? Don't worry about you? Don't wonder why in the hell we ever let you go back to that house in the first place?" he asked, somehow expressing fierce concern while still sounding gentle.

"Don't do this."

Will opened his mouth sharply, but he paused when his eyes met Max's and he seemed to deflate a little. He ran a hand through his hair. "Is this the worst it's ever been?"

"Yes. And it's not even that bad."

Will's jaw dropped an inch or two. "Not that bad? You have to be kidding me."

"I'm fine!" she said, indignant.

He sighed and stood up before offering his hand to Max. She cocked her head in confusion, but took the help anyway and let her friend lead her to the full-length mirror on the wall just inside Mrs. Byers' room.

"Look at yourself, please."

Max did a quick once-over and turned to her friend. "I get it Will, but

it's really not—”

“No. Actually *look*.”

She rolled her eyes but faced the mirror again. As she slowly took in her reflection she felt something catch in her throat. She'd seen herself since that past Monday, but she hadn't stopped and really took it all in. An angry purple bruise highlighted the swelling that took up the right side of her forehead. Despite her choosing her highest cut shirt that morning, the relatively shallow scratch marks were still visible lining her jaw down to her collarbone. And that was just the marks that were showing from that angle with those clothes. Standing there she finally saw herself for what she was; a small, battered girl that was trying her hardest to be stronger than a force so much bigger than her. In an instant Max's legs felt weak and her body exhausted, but she didn't move from where she stood.

With a shaking hands she rolled her sleeve up to reveal a deep bruise that was a perfect match for the shape of her stepfather's hand. Tears started pricking behind Max's eyes, but she ignored them. She reached down to grasp the hem of her shirt, and after the fabric slipped from her trembling fingers two times, she finally managed to pull her sweater off over her head. She almost wanted to laugh – this definitely wasn't how she imagined her first time taking her top off in front of a guy. But even without the new information on Will's preferences, the situation couldn't possibly be less sexual. Max tugged at her sports bra and turned to the side, staring at the rug-burn scabs that ran down one side of her rib cage. There was a certain mesmerizing horror about really looking at her injuries for the first time that completely overpowered any embarrassment she might have otherwise felt about showing her body. It was so strong that the barely-teenage girl didn't think twice when she hooked her thumbs under the waistband of her sweatpants, careful not to take her underwear as well. She pulled them around her ankles and flinched at the sight of herself. The discoloration around her right knee was worse than it'd been the last time she'd looked, and the swelling on her calves hadn't gone down like she'd hoped they would. How had she gotten here? If Max had been told she'd let things get this bad with Neil, she wouldn't have believed it. But here she was. Each mark on her body was a reminder of how she'd failed to take care of

herself. Each bruise was proof that no matter how hard she tried, she really was just a fourteen year old girl up against the world.

“Oh my god Max, what happened?”

She swallowed around the lump in her throat. “My stepdad lost his job on Monday, s-so my mom started yelling and he was yelling back and it just sorta h-happened. Most of it is because I fell down the stairs. So it's n-not like he did each one individually.”

The look that flashed in Will's eyes wasn't quite pity, but it was something close. Like sympathy or genuine pain. “Fell. Can you really tell me it was just a fall?”

Max bit her lip and looked past Will to the wall behind him. “He didn't mean to. I was trying to push past him to my bedroom and I wasn't listening to him when he said to go back to the kitchen. He didn't mean for me to actually fall down the staircase.”

“But you did.”

She closed her eyes and focused on controlling her shaking. “What am I supposed to do, Will?”

He placed a hand softly on her shoulder. “I have no idea. But the great thing about my mom is she always knows what to do.”

“I don't want her to know. I can't do that to her.”

“You aren't the one who did anything. And there's no way you're going back there.”

Max tried to suppress the ragged choking noise threatening to escape her throat, but it was no use. “If your mom sees she's gonna tell Hopper and everything in my life will be fucked, do you get that? It would change everything.”

“Would a change really be that bad?” he asked.

And with that she was wrapped in his arms, burying her head in his shoulder as he rubbed slow circles into her back. Max wasn't crying, but her body was shaking and heaving as if she were. This was it.

This was how the careful equilibrium she'd worked years to perfect got turned upside down. Jesus Christ, what was her mom gonna do? Billy? The people at school? She thought her worst nightmare coming true would be *only* these fears, but she was surprised to find that she was relieved too. The hiding, the lying, the bullshit – it was all over.

It took her several minutes to calm herself down, but eventually she pulled back.

“Thanks Will. You're so damn good to me,” she smiled shakily.

“Of course. Speaking of things that are good for you, will you please let me take care of some of these?” he gestured to her wounds. “Ice, compression, neosporin, I think there are a lot of things you haven't done yet.”

Max sniffed and chuckled. “Yeah, okay. You're such a mom.”

“Go lay on the couch, I'll get the stuff from the medicine cabinet.”

She turned to go before pausing a moment. “Hey Will? Until your mom gets home, can we pretend everything is normal? I just... I want a little more time before the shit storm comes.”

He nodded. “As long as I can still patch you up.”

She grinned so hard it hurt her head. “Of course.”

Will suddenly snorted. “God, think about what my mom is gonna walk in on. Here I was thinking that I'd never have to explain to her why I have a naked girl in the house.”

Max padded into the living room and laid herself down gently. “Speaking of which! You have a lot to fill me in on, dipshit. Tell me about you and Mike. Start at the beginning,” she called out.

“Bossy much?”

She smiled into the pillow. “You know you've been dying to tell me.”

Max could hear the smile in Will's voice as he called, “Shut up.”

## Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for your patience! I'm back into my normal routine, so the next update should be coming much much quicker than this one did. I'd REALLY appreciate your thoughts on this installation.

This chapter's fun fact: For a long time I played with the idea of Max being too injured to leave the house, and her calling Steve to come get her. I loved the Momma Steve vibe, but in the end I couldn't justify devoting enough time to fleshing it all out when it wouldn't actually effect the plot.

## 10. The Silence

### Notes for the Chapter:

I'm pretty sure this is the shortest chapter I've ever added to one of my works, but please be patient with me. I have a storm coming up really really soon, I promise.

Eleven was used to being confused. She was miles ahead of where she'd been when she'd first escaped the lab, but that didn't mean she wasn't still socially inept. She was good enough at hiding it that she could go unnoticed in public situations that baffled her, but everyone who knew El's past could tell when she didn't understand something. They'd always explain it to her or at least mouth "ask me later," even when the subjects were awkward or personal or sad. One of her favorite qualities in her friends was that they never seemed to mind her relentless questions and they didn't make her feel stupid for asking them.

Late fall of the party's freshman year was the first break in that pattern. Eleven started to suspect something was *really* off the Tuesday that only Dustin, Lucas, and her showed up to school. And when none of the others came back the next day, she knew something had happened. She asked Dustin about it and he said that they must be sick – but he kept licking his top lip. El paid strict attention to her surroundings, and she knew Dustin only did that when he was lying. And then when Lucas gave her the same answer while tapping his left thumb against his thigh (his tell), she was hurt. She tried never to take anything personally because more often than not there were social rules at play she didn't understand, but she couldn't help feeling outcast.

When she talked to Hopper about it a few days later he just hugged her, told her not to stress too much about it, and asked her to keep an extra close eye on Max. When she asked him why, he just huffed and asked about dinner. El was exhausted confused, and really hurt with everyone avoiding her questions.

The Monday after Thanksgiving break she was relieved to see that



Mike and the others were back, but her joy quickly faded when she noticed that they were acting even weirder than Lucas and Dustin. Whenever she asked a question about it, Mike told her not to worry. It was infuriating. Maybe something had happened at lunch one day, who knew. Throughout that week they all continued to help El study after school, but they seemed subdued and drawn back. Hop just said to wait it out, but she was getting impatient. When Thursday rolled around and things had only gotten worse, she tucked herself into bed with the resolution that if her friends were still being weird on Monday morning, she'd force information out of them. Maybe she'd even send a chair through a window to show she meant business. Someone *had* to talk to her.

Of course, as she slept that night she had no way of knowing that in less than twenty-four hours, the whole school would be talking about her friend group.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This chapter's fun fact: this is actually the second time I've covered El's social confusion in a story. The second, a stand alone one-shot that does NOT happen in the Open Book universe, can be found at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/12855336> (literally just a shameless plug)

## 11. The Broken Silences

Despite the late November temperature spike, in the true nature of Indiana weather Hawkins had returned to way too fucking cold, especially when pared with the gross morning drizzle that often came with the sunrise. For most people this didn't change a whole anything, but in the Byers' house it meant that more often than not mornings started at an ungodly hour so Mrs. Byers could drive Will and Max to school before her shift. The two missed being able to bike/skate to school, but they made the mistake of trying to brave the cold once and they weren't going to try it again. Technically riding the bus was an option, but no one had to say anything for them to know why that was a bad idea. There was no reason the school needed to have the fact that they're living together as fuel for gossip.

Max had only been at the Byers' full-time for a week. For Will it was almost like nothing had changed – for months she'd been over almost all the time anyway. The difference wasn't altogether ignoreable though. Every once in a while he'd look over at her while they were eating dinner or watching TV and she'd be staring, her eyes unfocused and blinking almost every second. In those moments Will took the time to think about just how crazy things must be for her.

With the help of vague phrasing, fudged paperwork, and the indifference of her blood family, Hopper'd made it seem like Joyce was some distant relation of Max's. Will wasn't sure exactly what was happening legally, but he knew that there was some sort of bullshit “inquiry” going on about Neil's behavior. Max said that it would take about a month and the most that would come of it was parenting classes. He didn't know if that was just Max being skeptical of the legal system or if that's what would actually happen, but in all honesty he tried not to think about it much. It may have come from a shit situation, but Max moving in with him was the best of the million ways his life had changed in the last few weeks.

Will spent a decent amount of time considering the complexities of his situation, but none of these things were going through his head that particular cold Friday morning. He wasn't thinking about much

of anything, seeing as he was barely even awake. That abruptly changed when Max pulled him out of the car and into the biting cold wind. The boy swore and struggled to pull his bag from the back seat and get the door closed before his mom drove off, already late to work. The friends jogged into the building and let out a synchronized sigh of relief when the door swung closed behind them. Will checked his watch and saw that they had a good seventy minutes before class started, so he led the way to their favorite corner of the school.

Neither of them were really into theater, but the alcove cut away in the white faux-brick wall was irresistible. A support beam sat not too far in front of the small opening, so there were only really two small spots a person could stand to be able to see them. This is where Max and Will spent their mornings (and afternoons when Mrs. Byers worked overtime, which was most days). They did lots of things to keep themselves occupied, but it always started off the same way.

“So what are you today?” Will asked as he eased himself down against the wall near the corner, sitting perpendicular to his friend.

“Somewhere around a five. You?”

He thought for a second and grimaced. “Maybe a three out of ten.”

“Shit man, what's up?”

“I dunno, nothing.”

Max snorted, but the boy knew she meant it in a kind way. “‘Nothing’ meaning you want me to drop it, ‘nothing’ meaning you don't want to feel like you're info-dumping on me, or ‘nothing’ meaning actually nothing?”

“Why do you know me so well?”

“I'm your step-second cousin once removed, remember? Our bond is indestructible.”

“Oh cram it.”

“So...?” Max quirked an eyebrow.

Will sighed. "I guess the middle one."

"So talk to me, why only a three? Info-dump all over me."

"I don't even know."

"C'mon," she prodded.

"I dunno. Nothing happened, but yesterday I was feeling kinda lonely. I mean, I have you. And I've never connected with someone this much other than," Will swallowed, "well, you know. But things have been weird and I must wish I could rewind two weeks and pause it there forever."

Max bit her lip and nodded. "I know what you mean. Are you changing your mind about talking to him?"

"Absolutely not."

"If you're feeling lonely, why don't you at least try it?"

"Because," Will explained, "I'm not going to him. If Mike has something he wants to say to me he knows where to find me, but I have nothing to say sorry about and I'm not gonna demand an apology from him. So what is there to say?"

Max looked at him with so much kindness in her eyes he wanted to punch something. "I guess I understand that."

"Yeah." The boy paused to unzip his coat and play with his pockets for a moment, but eventually he spoke again. "Speaking of the boys in our lives, how's Lucas?"

"Lucas is Lucas."

"Meaning...?" he mocked her voice from earlier and she smacked his knee.

"Do you really wanna hear about this, man? Nothing's really happened, and I don't wanna—"

"Yeah, I want to know about it," he interrupted. "As long as you want to talk about it."

The redhead licked her lips and started tugging on the end of a section of her hair. "He keeps bringing up my family. And like, I get it. He's worried. But I'm so tired of talking about them over and over and over again, you know? It's exhausting." She paused, but when Will nodded and hummed sympathetically she went on. "And I guess I feel bad. Because he's been so great to me, and until The Thing In the Forest it seemed like he was super understanding."

Will slowly reached out and patted her knee. "He *is* understanding."

"Only to me."

He opened his mouth to argue, but he couldn't think of a good point to make.

She shrugged and switched her fingers to a different lock of hair. "It sucks. 'cause I love him, I really do. But I don't love who he's being right now."

Will caught her gaze and gave a half-smile. "I know exactly what you mean."

They spent the next forty-five minutes working on the homework they'd neglected to do last night, only breaking to scribble the occasional swear word or crude drawing on the other one's papers. Will had finished what was required and was actually getting a jump-start on one of Monday's assignments when he heard a purposeful yet timid throat-clearing from above him. He looked up and his eyes widened at what he saw.

"Uh, hi guys."

Will swallowed dryly. "Hi."

"I'm gonna...I just remembered that I have to be...not here," Max mumbled as she quickly gathered her stuff and stood to leave. Will looked at her in a way he was sure screamed *what the fuck am I supposed to do?*, but she just smiled, shrugged, and left. He felt weird having to crane his neck up to see his visitor, so Will used the wall to push himself to standing. When there was only silence, Will sighed.

"Is there something you want?" Will asked.

"I just thought we could talk."

"Okay. So talk."

Mike scratched at the back of his head and looked at his feet. "What I said wasn't cool."

"I'd already figured that out for myself, but thanks for the information," it came out harsher than Will had intended, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

The taller boy looked sheepish as he shifted his weight. "I guess I'm trying to say that I'm sorry. I was freaking out and a lot of things were going through my head and I was..." he shrugged, "but that's not an excuse. I was an ass."

"Yeah. You were." Will wanted so desperately to leave it at that, but he couldn't bring himself to watch his best friend squirm in obvious discomfort for any longer. And there it was – despite everything, despite drifting closer to Max and farther from Mike, he still considered the boy in front of him his best friend. He cursed internally and sighed to the ceiling. "What took you a week and a half to come around and tell me that?"

"Can we just leave it at 'I'm an ass?'"

"No. I want to know what took you so long."

Mike looked at Will and immediately away again. "I was trying to figure things out. I mean, I knew I want you in my life, there was no doubt about that. But I was thinking my life would be easier," he dropped his voice as the hallways around them were beginning to become busy, "if I just wanted you back as my friend. I talked to Dustin about it actually. Like, a lot. Things would be a hell of lot easier if that's all I felt about you, but I can't make myself want that. I realized that I want to be normal, I want to take the easy path," Mike's voice began to shake as he finished his thought, "but I want you more."

Will closed his eyes and gave himself a moment to process before he

spoke. "I want to be pissed at you. I *was*, for a while at least. But I don't have the energy for that, it's too hard." He opened his eyes to see Mike reaching out to touch his shoulder, but Will shook his head no. "I know myself Mike, I know who I am as a person. And I know I'm going to forgive you. We'll get back to being friends because I couldn't take it if we weren't, and I don't think you could either."

The darker haired boy gave a sad smile that made his watery eyes shine. "I couldn't."

"But I'm not ready yet. I may not be pissed anymore, but I'm still hurt. Like, I've heard the sort of shit you said to me from almost everyone in my life, and just when I was trusting someone with the most secret part of me, you went and..." Will shook his head. "I'm just not ready yet. I know we're gonna be friends again, but I'm not promising you anything more than that."

Mike nodded and bit his lip. "I can understand that."

"You're going to have to."

"So how does this work? Do we start talking again? Do I stop taking the long way to class so I won't run into you?"

"Go ahead and take the normal routes again," Will allowed, "but we're taking this at my pace. If I want us to talk, I'll find you. Okay?"

Mike's eyes shone a little more and he sniffed, but he continued to nod. "I guess that's fair. I uh, I guess I should be getting to class, but like, do you want a hug? Or...?"

Will thought for a moment. "I'm not ready for that yet. But I'll take a firm handshake."

"A firm handshake?" the older boy's eyebrows shot up.

Will tried to keep a serious look, but a smile cracked across his face. "A firm handshake. Really grip from the elbow on, show me you mean business."

He could tell that Mike was also trying to remain deadpan, but his shoulders were ever so slightly shaking in silent laughter. He

extended his hand and Will took it, grasping hard. "It's been a pleasure negotiating with you."

Will couldn't entirely stifle his laugh at this, but he kept eye contact. "It's been a nice mediation. I guess I'll see you around."

As the two released, Mike gave what looked like a genuine smile as his posture relaxed. "'see you around."

Will relayed the basics of the conversation to Max and Dustin in the hallway between their first and second classes in order to prepare them for lunch. He highly doubted Mike would try to eat with them, but it was a possibility. Will didn't really want him back at the table quite yet, but if Mike came he wouldn't kick his friend out. But it wasn't like things had been normal lately anyway. They'd only been back from Thanksgiving break for five days, but a new precedent had already been set. Mike had moved to sit a few tables away with some sort-of friends from his study hall, and Lucas and Will switched days on who got to sit with Max and Dustin, with El still in lunch detentions. It was like shared custody after a weird, stiff divorce.

Will sat down and cringed at the amplified echoing that bounced around the cafeteria. He sighed and pulled his food out of its brown paper sack before standing and walking over to the mic stand. Every day at the end of lunch the principal read out a list of announcements that no one ever listened to, and the well-meaning oaf only had about a fifty percent success rate of turning the microphone off when he was done. Which gave Will the mild inconvenience of having to shut off the mic that was still ringing from the end of the previous lunch period. And normally all it was was that – a slight inconvenience that he didn't think about outside the fifteen seconds it took for him to do it. But all patterns must come to an end, and so it was that when he began his trek back to the table, Will felt his eyes widen.

Sitting across from where Will had set up his sack lunch at the otherwise empty table was Lucas. He was staring directly at Will, his tray of food an untouched prop in front of him. Will's mind started racing as he slowly shuffled towards his seat. Were they just going to ignore everything that had happened? Was it just gonna be this



unspoken awkwardness floating in the air? Or maybe Lucas was about to try to talk him out of liking boys. Possibilities swirled in his mind, but he still wasn't prepared for what actually happened as he sat back down.

"I'm not trying to make this weird dude, but you should probably leave."

Will was not prepared to respond to that. "W-what?"

Lucas set his elbows on the table and folded his hands as if he were in a business meeting. "Listen, I don't have any personal beef with you and I'm glad Max is staying with you, but for everyone's sake you really need to go."

Will narrowed his eyes. "And who decided what was best for everyone? You, or did you take a poll?" he wasn't quite sure where this confrontational cockiness was coming from – maybe he'd finally had enough shit thrown his way and was fed up.

Lucas looked genuinely surprised to see his friend fighting back. "Well yeah, I decided. Because the others are too soft to. We all have enough on our plates right now and we don't need people thinking of us as the faggot squad," he voice dropped, suddenly earnest. "Please just go dude. Max and Dustin are gonna be back with their trays in like four seconds and they don't need to see this happening. Don't make it hard on them."

The four seconds Lucas mentioned was actually closer to fifteen, but it was still too short of a time to decide what to do. Will thought about insulting Lucas. He thought about trying to reason with him. He even considered giving up and just leaving. But in all honesty the too-small teen was exhausted. This had been in the back of Will's mind since that day in the clearing; Lucas was splitting the party in two and making people pick a side. It had been bubbling under the surface all this time – why not just get it over with? Will swallowed as he realized he really didn't know which way Max and Dustin would go.

In the end Will's decision was inaction and the two missing members of their ever-shrinking lunch table appeared, their conversation

trailing into silence as they saw the boys sitting opposite each other. The two glanced at each other and sat down.

“So...are we one big happy family again? Is it all good? Or like, what's going on here?” Dustin asked.

Lucas coughed. “Not exactly. I was just talking to Will about how it might be good for everyone if he took a step back and stayed away.”

“Away from what?” Max's nostrils flared.

“Away from us babe. All of us.”

Max's jaw dropped, but Dustin was first to speak. “Oh come *on* man, get your head out of your ass.”

“I told you not to fucking do this,” Max hissed.

“And I told you that it's what's best.”

“Oh my god, I really didn't think you were this stupid! I figured you just needed time. After everything you guys have done for each other and every thing you've been through together, you're throwing it all away. Jesus Christ,” she laughed humorlessly.

Will blinked a few time. It was a lot to take in all at once. “Calm down Max,” he mumbled.

Dustin's eyes widened. “*You're* defending him?! How can you not be taking this personally dude?”

Will shrugged and looked down. “This has nothing to do with me. It's about him,” he gestured at Lucas.

Max threw her hands up in frustration. “It was just looking like we were gonna get Mike back and now you gotta go and pull this shit.”

Lucas had been snapping his head back and forth to look at whoever was speaking. The boy kept huffing and opening his mouth, and it was clear that this conversation was not going the way he expected it to. “So you and Mike are a thing again?” he directed the question like it was an insult.

“No, we're not. Not that it's any of your goddamn business who I date,” Will said coolly.

At this Lucas physically rose to standing and ran a hand through his hair. “Oh my *god*, you're worse than I thought! You need professional help, not a fucking fairy boyfriend,” he slammed his hands on the table which made all of the untouched food rattle. The surrounding tables were all looking at them and all conversations within earshot had halted. His “friend's” words felt like a slap to the face, but Will was just glad the boy had enough sense to say the actual insult quietly.

No one said anything for a long moment. Lucas was breathing hard and Will was sure his face was on fire. Eventually, Max stood and faced the antagonizer.

“Actually, I think I'm the one that doesn't need a boyfriend,” she said, her strong voice seeming to echo.

His jaw dropped. “Babe, think about—”

“No, I don't need to think about it. I definitely don't need a boyfriend,” she exhaled sharply. “Good thing I don't have one anymore.”

There was an actual *oooooh* from a handful of bystanders, but the party ignored it.

Lucas floundered. “Maxie, c'mon. You...c'mon,” he said breathlessly.

Her face remained stony. “I think you should go. It's what's best for everyone.”

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Sorry this took so long to post, but...thoughts?

## 12. The Fairy F\*ggot

Years ago during one of countless tangents in the middle school AV club, Mr. Clarke explained something called the gambler's fallacy. It's the relatively simple concept that if events are truly independent of each other, any past results will have no impact on the future. Stated like that it seemed obvious, but Mr. Clarke had explained that people get caught in the fallacy all the time. If the last hundred coin flips have all been tails, people think the next one's *got* to come up heads.

Dustin felt like he'd been fairly careful not to fall for this line of thinking since that little lesson, and he largely succeeded. That was until the crazy eventful fall of freshman year. The whole weekend after Max broke up with Lucas, Dustin felt an intense sense of relief. The party had gone through so much drama in such a short amount of time, it had to be over. They had to be due for a break, right? But of course that's not the way of the world, and it's not how it worked out for anyone.

Will seem subdued at lunch that next Monday, which Dustin completely understood. Who wouldn't be stressed out with everything that the guy was going through? Still, Dustin was worried and Will hadn't answered many of his questions during the meal, so he decided to walk with his small friend to his locker in an attempt to engage.

"So how've you been man?"

"Oh I'm excellent. Best month of my life, I'm loving it," he snorted.

"Okay, that was a dumb question," Dustin allowed. "Lemme try it like this I guess – how've you been holding up? Like, on a day-to-day kinda way?"

It was only when Will reached up to brush his hair out of his face that Dustin noticed the pronounced circles under his eyes. "I dunno man, 's hard to say. I don't really want to talk about it, you know? I'd just like some time to focus on literally anything else."

Dustin nodded as the two shuffled to a stop in front of Will's locker.

"I get that. Luckily, you're talking to the master of distraction."

"Is that so?" he smiled as he fiddled with his combination.

"Yes. I'd like to tell you all about my developing theory that Ms. Newman and Mrs. Bratton have a conspiracy to sink El's grade, if I may."

"Proceed," Will smiled.

"Awesome, so, Exhibit A, in October when—"

But Dustin never got the chance to say what happened in October, because at that precise moment Will's locker burst open with several loud thumps. It sounded cliché, but Dustin genuinely saw the carnage in slow motion. A small tub that had been precariously balanced on the top shelf tipped forward, and the larger teen saw a glimpse of what was inside before it even hit Will's chest: pink glitter. Enough finely ground, sparkling pink glitter to fill one of the school's stained industrial-sized spaghetti pans. As the tub started to fall down Will's body though, Dustin noticed something else leaving streaks across his friend's body – but what was it? Whipped cream? Glue? Foam soap? Dustin snarled as the smell hit him, and he knew exactly what it was. Everyone in his mom's book club used the exact same Pansy Pink shaving cream from Dollar World because it could be bought in bulk, and the scent really seemed to cling to skin for dear life. As the tub clattered to the ground, Dustin's attention was brought to the locker itself. The glitter and cream mixture had been smeared everywhere, including on Will's schoolbooks, spare jacket, and backpack. But it was the lock door that *really* made his blood boil. Scrawled in some kind of red paint or marker was **DIE FAIRY FAGGOT DIE**.

It must have taken Dustin a good three seconds to absorb all this information, but it felt like years. When he finally looked back at Will, he saw cheeks redder than blood and a well of tears in the boy's eyes. His hands were still frozen in the air where they had been entering the combination.

"Fuck, Will, shit. Oh my god, are you okay?"

He slowly turned and looked up. "I can't," he said, his voice cracking.

“Oh my god man, I'm so sorry. Shit. I mean really, like *fuck*,” Dustin knew he wasn't exactly being helpful, but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

The tears started falling down Will's face as he gritted his teeth and gestured to the other people in the hallway, “Make them stop staring at me.”

It was the depth of the humiliation in his friend's voice that made Dustin spring into action. He struggled to wiggle his arms out of his leather jacket and ripped it off before draping it around Will. The boy was drowning in it, but at least it was long enough on him to cover the shaving cream smudges that went all the way down to the knees of his jeans. Dustin told Will to go to the bathroom to clean up and wait for him, and it didn't need to be said twice. Dustin quickly threw the empty tub into Will's locker, slammed it shut, and rubbed the white splatters into the carpet with the sole of his shoe. He made sure there was no evidence on the outside of the locker, shot a death glare to all the gaping bystanders, and sprinted off to complete the rest of his plan.

A half an hour later found Dustin squatting down in a bathroom to see the shoes in the only occupied stall. He sighed in relief when he recognized them.

“Will, you can come out, it's just me.”

The door squeaked open and the boy shuffled forward. “What took you so l-long, slowpoke?” he let out a laugh, but it sounded forced and weak. Dustin had to fight a sad grimace. His friend's eyes were bloodshot and his face was flushed. Judging from the mound of pink and white stained paper towels in the trash, Will had tried quite a few times to clean himself and his clothes, but sparkles were ground in everywhere on his skin and tee.

“Sorry dude, I was getting these,” Dustin gestured to the haphazardly folded shirt and pants he had in his hands.

Will looked down and turned even redder, if that was possible.

"Thanks man, but I shouldn't take those. I tried really hard to get your jacket clean, but I guess glitter sticks to leather. I'm so sorry, I'll get it dry cleaned."

Dustin snorted. "I can't believe that's what you're worrying about right now. Don't stress, it's fine. Seriously."

"I don't want to ruin all your clothes."

He grinned an awkward, sheepish grin. "Yeah, about that...I didn't have any extra clothes here."

Will cocked his head to the side. "Then what are those?"

"Uh, sorry," Dustin pushed them forward. "Just try them on."

"Whose are they?" he took them slowly and groaned. "Are you *serious*?"

He shooed Will back into the stall. "They're all I could find that would fit you, okay? I tried."

Dustin heard a grumbling the entire time his friend was changing, but after a while he emerged. A beat of silence passed, and then both boys burst into laughter.

"Why the hell do these fit perfectly?" Will wheezed.

Dustin guffawed, "I think they look better on you than they do on Max honestly."

"Think she'll be mad I got them all sparkly?"

"Nah dude, I think it's an improvement."

They took that moment to laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation, because all things put aside, it was an objectively funny scenario. It looked as if a unicorn imploded in the men's room trashcan. Eventually the chuckling subsided as the friends fought to sober up. Their smiles faded and Dustin watched a dull hardness return to Will's eyes. It reminded him of how his uncle looked after he came back from active combat – it was an exhausted kind of

weakness. Not necessarily fragile, but like all his armor had been beaten off and he was left standing tired and exposed. Dustin was about to open his mouth to say something when Will beat him to it.

"I'm just done, you know?" he whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"I feel like everyone should have limited pain per decade of their life. The shit with my dad was an okay amount for my first ten years, but I think I've gotten my fair share for this decade already, you know? I'm just done with all the bullshit. I'm *done*."

Dustin swallowed around the lump in his throat threatening to suffocate him. "I can't even imagine what it's like for you."

Will exhaled and shook his head. "That's the thing. No one does."

"I know someone who might kind of get it," When he saw the look on Will's face, he hurried to say, "I'm not saying you should forgive him yet, I'm just saying...Mike's probably the one that's gonna come closest to understanding what you're going through."

Will's upper lip curled in. "Maybe. We'll see."

"That's fair," Dustin nodded. "Do you wanna talk about today? What they wrote in your—"

"No, actually, I'd prefer not to think about how exactly someone broke into my locker to leave me a death threat."

The bigger teen winced but nodded. He'd investigate it on his own time, Will shouldn't have to deal with the nitty gritty of it all. Dustin still might not've worked out the details of his feelings on two of his best friends being homosexuals, but he didn't need to think twice about protecting the guy that had been to hell and back several times over.

He took a deep breath, steeled himself to ignore his lingering discomfort with this whole subject. Ignoring every "manly" instinct that'd been ingrained in his mind since birth, Dustin shuffled forward and awkwardly wrapped his arms around Will. The smaller boy



stiffened at first, but then layed into his friend.

“Hang in there Byers. You're not done yet,” he muttered.

Both boys pretended not to notice when tears spilled over Will's eyes and soaked into his friend's shirt.

### 13. The Meeting

He felt weird doing this. Using a lot of unsound leaps in reason and blatant dismissal of facts almost let him convince himself that this was perfectly normal, but he knew it was bizarre. And a terrible idea. And it was simultaneously taking things too far and not far enough. But backing out at that point would only make things worse than they already were, so he was stuck in his plan. It had been two weeks since the big blow up at the lunch table, and there were only five days before Christmas break, so it had to be done now.

That's what he told himself as he waited in the empty and forever-unlocked AV room after school. He was only there a few minutes, however, before he heard the patterned knock he was waiting on. He shot up, paced quickly to the door, and swung it open.

"Hey man," he muttered.

"Hi Lucas," Dustin said, somehow conveying both stoniness and innocent confusion. "What's up?"

Lucas shut the door and made his way to a seat. "It's been a while since we've talked, I thought we could catch up. You know, general life stuff."

"In a dark closet where no one can see?"

He swallowed hard. "Yes."

Dustin allowed a small smile as he sat down, but his voice was still dripping with sarcasm when he said, "We think Tews got the neighbor's cat pregnant and my mom wants to rearrange the living room for the third time this year." He snorted, "C'mon dude, you're clearly fishing for something. What's up? Just come out and say it."

Lucas felt his stomach churn, but he couldn't help but chuckle. Dustin's incredibly low tolerance for bullshit was one of the things he loved and hated most about his friend. "Jesus Christ, I wanna hear how the party's doing, okay? I wanna know how you're doing with Judy Miller and how El's grades are and if Max is still out of her

house and if Will and Mike—" he sniffed, "how they're doing too."

"You want to know what's going on with us? Well you could have fooled me. Seemed like you didn't want anything to do with us."

Lucas bristled. "You know what, fuck this. I tried," he stood up and took a step towards the door when Dustin held up a hand.

"C'mon, stay. I'll stop being so pissy, I promise. I've really missed you."

"Huh, looks like spending time around queers has made you more touchy-feely," Lucas squared his shoulders as he eased back into his seat.

"Do you want me to update you or not, dickwad?" Dustin said through an exasperated smile.

"Yeah, I do."

"Then shut up and behave. I guess I'll go easiest to hardest. I took Judy out to a drive-in and she seemed to enjoy it, but every time I've asked to hang out she says she's busy. I dunno, maybe she really is busy, but it just seems weird."

"Did you make out?" Lucas asked.

"Irrelevant," Dustin muttered, but Lucas saw the answer in his friend's smile. "Anyway, El's grades are getting better, but she's really stressed over finals. She wants to be off probation at the beginning of the new semester, so she's always studying now. She's so distracted she hasn't questioned your absence too much, which makes things easier."

"She still doesn't know?"

"Honestly I have no idea how much she knows," Dustin waved his hand. "But yeah. Mike is back to eating lunch with us, and he and Will are actually talking without it being physically uncomfortable for everyone around them, so that's cool."

Lucas' brow furrowed. "They weren't talking to each other?"

“God I forget how much you've missed. Yeah, it was a whole thing, and it's still getting worked out. Plus Will's still nervous from the, uh, the—”

“The stuff with his locker?”

“Yeah, that.”

Lucas shifted in his seat and bit his lip. “What exactly happened? Like, everyone says a different thing, but no one really knows what went down and who did it and why.”

“Someone broke into Will's locker, fucked everything up, and wrote,” Dustin scratched the back of his head, “well, they wrote four words; half of them were insults, and the other half was 'die.'”

“No fucking way.”

“Yeah. We thought it was Troy at first, because *duh*, but he swears he didn't do it. He says it was one of his friends who doesn't believe that El can fuck shit up with her mind. We're working on figuring it out.”

Lucas nodded and brainstormed for how he could keep putting off the question he was so afraid to ask. “Do they hate me?”

Dustin paused for a moment, apparently thinking. “No, probably not. But they're pissed and hurt. And they think *you* hate *them*.”

“I don't hate them,” he mumbled. “I just hate what they're doing to themselves with all this crap.”

“I get it, I can't say it's my favorite thing either man.”

“Then how do you sit there like nothing's wrong?” Lucas said, a mix of exasperation and aggression in his voice.

“Because they've been through enough. Either they'll snap out of it or they won't, but in the mean time this is what makes them happy, so why not, you know?”

“And you aren't afraid of what'll happen when this gets out?”

Dustin pursed his lips. “*If* it gets out. And of course I'm afraid, it'd suck donkey ass for all of us. But even if it goes that way, I can save a little bit of face by distancing myself from them, or I can be a social pariah right there next to my best friends, the people who have literally risked their lives for me. I'd take that over in-tact but alone.”

“You wouldn't be alone, we'd still be hanging out,” Lucas defended.

“Yeah, but I'd have to hurt everyone else to do that. Will and Mike have found some happiness in each other, even if things are shit right now. You should see how they look at each other when they think no one's watching. It's disgustingly cute.”

Lucas snorted. “Disgustingly something for sure.”

There was a beat of silence as the boys made eye contact. At first it was a tense moment to follow up Lucas' comment, but then there was a shift. Lucas opened and closed his mouth as he tried to find the words. His only unasked question about the party was hanging in the air above them, and from the look on Dustin's face it seemed like it was going to be more guillotine than pinata.

Eventually Lucas gulped. “How is she?” he murmured, not needing to clarify who *she* was referring to.

“The police's inquiry is just about over. She's going back to her house at the end of this week.”

It felt like a punch to the stomach. Lucas' chest was filling with the same anxious dread that plagued him after Will's disappearance so long ago. It was the feeling that the world was just waiting to give him news of a disaster he couldn't do anything about.

“So that's it? Nothing's changed?”

Dustin exhaled through his nose in disdain. “Pretty much, yeah. It's a slap on the wrist, a record on file, and a three hour anger management seminar on Saturday.”

Lucas felt red hot anger swell in his gut and he rocketed out of his seat. “You've got to be fucking kidding me! How is that fair?”

“It's not.”

“How the hell could that be safe?!”

“It's not.”

“How could the *police* of all people think it's a good idea to put her back in there?!”

“I don't know man. I'm sorry.”

Somewhere in there, he couldn't really remember when, Lucas started pacing. “I've gotta go talk to her, make sure she knows that she can—”

“That she can what, come to you? Trust you? You know that's not true. The Byers have been her only real support through this, and you threw Will under the bus in front of her.”

Lucas opened his mouth to argue, but nothing came.

Dustin sighed. “I know it's hard man, and truth is we're both way out of our depth on so many levels here. But if you can't figure out how to be peaceable for the boys, do it for Max. There's no way she's bailing on Will, but I think she needs you too.” He stood and brushed of his thighs, turning to leave. “So get your shit together.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm starting to get into concrete outlines of the rest of the story, so if you have a suggestion for something you'd like to see, tell me now! What did you think of this installment? How're you feeling about Lucas right about now?

## 14. The Adventure

### Notes for the Chapter:

For those of you who don't know D&D -- a "nat one" is a natural one, meaning the roll came up as a one before any modifiers, armor, or special add-ons. A d-20 is slang for a twenty-sided die, which is the most commonly used.

For those of you who DO know D&D -- I haven't played in literal years, and I forget a lot of the details, so I'm sorry for any inaccuracies!

Mike took a steadying breath. Excitement swirled in his stomach with anxiety and awkwardness until his insides felt like a Molotov cocktail of hormonal panic. He'd done his best to respect Will's need for space, seeing as he was the ass who'd blown open the rift between them in the first place. For weeks Mike held his tongue in all the situations where he'd normally invite his best friend over or make some playful jab at the boy. He remembered Will's words – *If I want to talk, I'll find you*. Mike had been doing a pretty good job of it, too, until a few days ago when Will was complaining about how long it'd been since they'd played D&D. Granted, they all knew it was because it would feel wrong to do it without Lucas, but still. The game had been a tradition for the party for years; going without it felt like losing another friend. Which is why in the moment, Mike hadn't thought twice before inviting Will over for a one-on-one campaign for old time's sake. Mike had shocked himself by asking, but he was even more surprised when Will said yes.

And thus Mike spent three days straight preparing the campaign. One-on-ones weren't exactly common, and the Wheeler boy had never been a part of one. Add that to this being the first time Will and him would be spending time alone together since the incident *and* the additional pressure Mike put on himself by trying to make the adventure truly special, and he was almost vibrating from stress by the time he heard the doorbell ring and his mom letting Will in.

For every second footstep he heard coming down the stairs, Mike wiped the sweat from his hands onto his corduroys. He tried to tell

himself that it was just like any other hang out, but he knew that was a load of crap. He heard the soft *pat* of feet hitting carpet, looked up, and inhaled as he felt his jaw drop. Holy shit. Standing before him was Will Byers in a baby pink sweater Mike had never seen before, the smaller boy's hair brushed behind his ears. The new shirt combined with the flush in his cheeks only confirmed to Mike that pink was *definitely* his favorite color.

"Hi," he breathed.

"Hey man."

"Thanks for coming over."

Will shrugged and gave a small smile. "My pleasure. I missed it down here." He took a minute to wander around the basement, his hand brushing against shelves and various nick-knacks.

His friend was only circling the room, but Mike's heart reacted like he was receiving a strip tease. "Yeah, it's been weird without you guys. It's been so long since this place has been just a room, you know?"

Will finished his meandering and sat himself across from Mike. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Things have been so weird, it's nice to be down here and get back to normal."

Mike felt his stomach lurch into his throat. Normal. Of course Will would want to just have a normal day. But he'd been too stupid to see that, and the campaign he had planned was anything but 'normal.'

"Did I say something?"

Mike swallowed. "What?"

"You look like you got punched, what's wrong?" Will asked.

"Nothing, nothing."

Will chuckled gently. "How many times do we have to establish that you can't lie to me worth shit? What's up?"

Mike forced what he was sure was an utterly unconvincing smile.



“Nothing. Just, maybe we want to do D&D another day? I don't know if I've really got the campaign where I want it, there might be holes...”

“You've been scribbling in your notebook for three says straight dude. I wanna see what you have planned.”

God damn, Will was good. Mike threw his hands up. “It's not exactly a 'back to normal'type of adventure, okay?”

The smaller teen adjusted himself in his seat and put his elbows on the table. “Okay, now I *need* see what you planned.”

“I don't know if–”

“Spill it Wheeler!” he grinned.

And strangely enough, that was enough to get Mike started. Things were weird between them, but it was getting better. They were talking, joking, they were on good enough terms to make demands if each other. They were friends again. And for the moment, that was enough.

“Bossy much?” Mike smiled. He took a breath and put on his dramatic dungeon master's voice, “Will the Wise, your magic has continued to impress your peers and those around you. You've done so well, you've recently started at a prestigious spell-caster's academy not too unlike where you've studied before. But that's not the only change you've encountered lately.”

“Oh it's not?”

“Shut up,” he shot, fighting to stay serious and turning back to his paper, “As I was saying, you've begun to make your way through this academy. You learn that young wizards are often expected to begin a quest with someone who complements their abilities. It's not a requirement, but the quests are often helpful and enjoyable. You find yourself wanting to start one. You find another young student you want to adventure with, but then you hear the news. It is expected that wizards go on these quests only with elves, as the village around you seems to believe that humans and elves complement each other,

and it's what the nature spirits want. You, however, think your abilities pair best with one of your fellow humans.” Mike swallowed thickly. He'd reached the point of no return. He steeled himself and looked up to take in his friend's reaction.

Will's eyebrows were raised and his head was tilted to the side, but an amused smile was fighting its way onto his face.

Mike cleared his throat and continued, “Our campaign starts in the Forest of Fear, where you and your human adventuring partner are standing in a worship alter, casting a spell to bring some light to dispel the forest's despair. You are in the middle of summoning the first pillar when you hear a rustling in the nearby bushes.”

The older boy studies his friend intently through the curtain of bangs he's let fall in front of his face. Will's forefinger scratched lightly at his thumb and his eyes were partially squinted, but the rosy tinge to his cheeks had only deepened.

After a moment's pause, he spoke. “I approach the bush with my staff and push the greenery to the side.”

“You reveal a large, growling wolf bearing its teeth at you. Next to it is a small, red-furred doe.”

“I walk backwards as slow and quiet as I can.”

“Roll for stealth,” Mike said.

Will picked up the nearest twenty-sided die and rolled it across the table. Both boys snorted when it skittered to a stop.

“A nat one? You trip on the back of your robe and fall on your ass. You do two backwards somersaults over yourself and hit your nose with your staff.”

The sound of Will's peeling laughter made Mike's stomach flip. “Fuck you Wheeler.”

“Um that's Fearless Dungeon Master to you,” he smiled.

Will huffed while still smiling. “Whatever. Do I take any damage

from my wreckless attempt to *slowly back away?*”

“Roll for it.”

Will picked up the d-20 and released it again, revealing a twelve.

“Do you have any health modifiers right now?”

The younger boy looked over his player sheet. “Uh, no I don't think so.”

“Okay then. The tip of your staff nearly hits your eye, but thankfully it swipes past without incident. You do, however, anger the wolf.”

“Perfect.”

“It begins to approach you, but the doe stays back. What do you do?”

“Am I confused or disoriented?”

Mike smiled. “Roll for it.”

Will threw up his hands and sighed, “Knew I shouldn't have asked.” The die came up with another one, which only made the boys laugh harder.

“Yes, you're very confused. You have a minus three mod on all spells you cast.”

“Well fuck. Uh, I guess I'll go for a basic protection charm.”

“Roll for it,” Mike said in a sing-song.

“*Fuck off,*” Will responded to the same tune. Both boys laughed so hard they snorted when a one came up on the d-20 for the third time that night.

After the guffawing subsided, Mike bit his lip. Now was as good a time as any to do the grand reveal. “You're so disoriented, you end up casting a spell of knowledge instead.”

“God damn it Michael,” he smiled. “What do I learn? And I swear if you make me roll for it I'll kill you.”

Mike took a breath. "You learn that you're in a forest, and that there is a wolf and doe near you. You see--"

"Oh shut up. I've learned I'm in a forest, wow."

Mike held up a finger. "AND, you see that while the wolf is hungry, the doe is docile and calm. You also see that the human you picked to adventure with is actually, uh, he's the local village idiot masquerading as someone who knows what he's doing."

Will flashed one of his doofy half-smiles. "Okay, I have to admit that's a good one."

"I thought you'd like it."

"Does the village idiot do anything to help me?"

Mike closed his eyes and inhaled slowly. This is what he got for writing such a serious storyline. "No. He cowers under his down arms. Your knowledge spell reveals that he'll regret it for the rest of his idiot life." Mike reopened his eyes to see Will nodding slowly.

"I try again for the protection charm." Without having to be asked, Will picked up the die and rolled a nine.

Mike thought for a moment before nodding to himself. "A weak shield materializes around you. The wolf pounces and fights at the shield, and after a few swings its paws break through. It sinks its teeth into your side, but before it can rip back, the doe jumps on it and bites the wolf. She's stronger than she looks, and she pulls the wolf back into the woods. Before your confusion has fully faded, it's over and you're alone in the alter area with the village idiot."

"How much damage have I sustained?"

"Two hit points, but you're still bleeding."

Will nodded. "I cast a healing spell."

"Nope, you're still too confused."

"I hate you Mike Wheeler."

“Shut up, no you don't.”

Will crossed his arms and pouted his lip. Mike could've sworn he heard his friend mutter, “Shut up with your logic and accuracy.”

Mike ran a hand through his hair and shuffled his papers to make it look like he was busy. He wiped his hands on his jeans. “The village idiot stumbles his way towards you and asks if he can help patch you up. He tells you he wants to help you heal and keep adventuring with you.”

Will looked across the table, something behind his eyes that Mike couldn't quite put his finger on. “I cast another knowledge spell to assess his sincerity.” The sound of the plastic die skittering across the table thudded in time with Mike's lurching heart. Both boys looked down at the natural twenty and back to each other.

“You see that the idiot is terrified, and he doesn't know how to protect you, and he doesn't know how to adventure with another human. But you can see that he means it when he says he wants to try and figure it out with you.”

Suddenly, Will's chair pulled back and the Byers boy starts walking around the table. Mike sucked in a shaky breath when he felt his friend's arms wrap around him from behind, Will's head resting on top of his own.

“I accept.”

Mike tried to fight through the surprise he felt at the unexpected tears falling down his face. This was supposed to be a fun and cute D&D game, not a time to cry. They hadn't even really started the campaign anyway. “T-thank you,” he managed eventually.

“Also,” Will leaned towards Mike's ear to whisper, “you realize you're implying that girls aren't even human, right?”

He hiccuped a laugh. “Shut up.”

“Make me.”

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

So there it is guys...you waited a month for a 2k word chapter. I'm sorry it took so long to get an actual update, but I hope you enjoyed it! Please tell me what you thought, because your comments truly do keep me going.

## 15. The Explanation

Eleven Jane Hopper hadn't been this excited since the Snow Ball. All through Christmas Break she'd paced the halls of her house wondering when the last papers would be submitted and mailed out. When they finally were, she almost collapsed with relief. Despite it being absolute torture to keep a secret, El'd decided to only tell Dustin before the big lunchtime reveal since he was such a big part of why she'd made it. She wanted to see everyone's faces when they found out. She wasn't quite sure why the party wasn't jumping through hoops to make it so they all shared a lunch this year – that's what they'd done last semester – but as luck would have it, they were all together anyway. Perfect.

The first day back at school, she made sure she was late to the cafeteria. She wanted everyone to be at the table when she walked up. She let eight minutes pass before she couldn't take it anymore. El tucked her hair behind her ears, took the paper from her pocket and unfolded it, and almost skipped up to their usual spot. When she was close enough to hear Will's light giggle, she had to stop herself from breaking into a run. However, her brow furrowed when she turned the corner. Two chairs were empty at the six-seat circular table. She surveyed it quickly; where was Lucas? But Dustin had already caught her eye, which meant the others would soon. She couldn't turn back now, she'd have to tell him later.

El jogged the last few steps and slammed the paper in the center of everyone's trays. "Two point five one," she declared. " 'Thriving' GPA."

Max and Will were squinting at the report card, whereas Mike was looking at her, mouth simultaneously gaping and smiling. Dustin just laughed. After a moment of silent shock, chaos broke loose.

"Holy shit!" Mike laughed. "Congratulations!"

"So you're off academic probation?" Will asked. She nodded proudly. "Oh my god, you're back!"

In all the commotion, Max had risen from her seat and stalked

around to meet El. She redhead engulfed her in a hug so big, El's feet lifted off the ground. "Thank. Fucking. God." Max whispered as she pulled back. "The boys are *impossible* to deal with without you. I thought I was gonna go crazy."

Eleven excused herself for a minute to go get food, but when she came back everyone was still smiling like an idiot. Dustin smirked at her from across the table and moved to speak around the giant bite of hot dog in his mouth.

"So does this mean you're gonna sign up for—"

"Ah ah ah!" she interrupted. She bit her lip when everyone turned to stare at her. "Now that I'm off probation, there's an after school activity I would like to do, but it is a surprise. You'll see."

"Oops, my bad," he grimaced.

"Tell me about you though. How have you all been? Talk!" El demanded.

The party looked around at one and other, and Max eventually shrugged and cleared her throat. "Apparently there's some crazy stuff going on at my step-dad's work, so he's never home anymore. So I pretty much spend all my time at Will's, except now when I go home there's more junk food 'cause my mom feels guilty. It's actually a pretty sweet set up," she grinned.

"Tomorrow, you bring me some," El smiled.

"Har har, very funny. But yeah, sure."

"Do you see Lucas?"

Everyone froze. Dustin even stopped chewing. Max shifted in her seat and Mike and Will shared a look. It was so quiet, they could hear the echo from the announcement microphone that'd been left on yet again. Will excused himself to shut it off.

"What did I say?"

"Nothing, nothing," Max mumbled. "You're fine, don't worry. I just



forget that you missed a lot. We actually broke up. That's kinda why he's not sitting with us anymore."

Eleven could feel her eyes widen and she quickly tried to rearrange her face into a neutral expression. "I'm sorry. Why did it end?" She watched as Max bit her lip and looked at Mike. What did that mean? Was she dating Mike now?

"It's complicated, and a really long story. I'll tell you later, okay?"

El wanted to pout and throw her hands in the air and demand to know right then. She hated feeling stupid, naive, less than. But she wanted her first day back to be pleasant, so she just nodded. Before she could figure out what to say, Will came back, sitting down slowly.

Mike took one look at his face and frowned. "What happened? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Friends don't lie," El said.

Will sighed. "John Anderson just shoved me and told me to use my pretty wings to fly back to the other side of the rainbow." El didn't really understand what that meant, but the cold way Will said it mixed with Mike's bristling, Max's look of sympathy, and Dustin's shifting eyes and body, she assumed it was an insult.

"Do you want me to say something?" Mike growled. "Cause I can go over there and say something right now. I'll tell him to shove his comments up his ass."

Mike opened his mouth to say more, but Will just held up a hand. "No, don't. I just hate that this is getting around after the whole locker thing."

"Actually," Dustin coughed and looked up from where he was staring down at his food. "I have some news about that. I talked to Troy, and he says he didn't have anything to do with that whole thing, but he thinks it was John. John's mom works in the office, and she has the combos for every locker in the building. And Troy told him about,"

Dustin glanced at Eleven and hesitated, “he told John about the Will thing, which made me want to bash his head in right then. The mouthbreather promised not to tell anyone. But yeah,” he shrugged. “John doesn't believe that El can move shit, so he's not afraid.”

El looked over at Will and saw his face set into place, his jaw jutting forward. Yet again she was completely lost and confused in the conversation, but it felt like a bad time to stop and ask for an explanation. What surprised her more than anything though was that Mike looked even more upset than Will. She supposed it was just because the two were close, but still. Eleven sighed and made a note to herself to ask Max more questions about social standards later.

After a series of deep breaths, Mike turned to El. “Can you do some stuff to him? Don't hurt him, just scare him, move shit around, freak him out. Show him that you *can* hurt him if you want, and tell him to shut the fuck up. Please?”

She nodded. “Am I allowed to ask why this time, or is it the same 'just trust me' thing like when I had to mess with Troy?”

He grimaced. “It's a long story dude, I'll– ”

“Yeah yeah, you'll explain it to me later. That's what you guys always say. But yes, I will do it,” El grumbled. She rubbed at her forehead and sighed. She wanted her reunion to be fun, not like this. “Dustin,” she said, turning to him. “Update me on Judy Miller.”

With that, the curly haired, muscled-up, absolute *master* of subject changes smiled and folded his hands on the table. “I'm glad you asked. You girls are absolute enigmas. Winter break was a roller-coaster. Let me set the scene for you,” he began

El smiled and bit into her hot dog. This was what she missed.

---

In all honesty, Eleven totally forgot about all the weirdness at lunch until two days later. She was just hanging out around the house,

waiting for Hop to come home from work. He promised he'd teach her how to make baked beans that night. He said it was just dumping a can into a dish and putting it into the oven, but last time she'd tried to do something like that alone she'd almost set the kitchen on fire. So when she heard the doorbell ring, she just assumed Hopper had forgotten his keys again. When she opened the door, her eyebrows shot up at what she saw.

"Hey there. What're you doing here? What do you want?"

"Hey now, what did I say about manners?" Mike said it with a laugh, but she could've sworn his voice was higher and thinner than usual.

Still, she just rolled her eyes. "I mean, hello, look at the weather, would you like to come in?" she snorted and turned around, pushing the door open behind her. "Seriously, what's up? You guys never meet me here. This place is boring."

Will entered after Mike, pushing the door closed so that it barely clicked into place. "We wanted to talk to you."

"We talk every day."

"No, I mean alone," Will said.

"Oh. Okay. Didn't you guys tell me that that's what adults say when they want to tell you something bad? 'We need to talk'?" Eleven led them towards the couch and sat down, popping open a Coke she'd just gotten out before they came. She gestured towards the fridge as an invitation to her friends, but they both just shook their heads and lowered themselves into seats across from her.

"It's not bad," Mike said as he wrung his hands together in his lap. "Or maybe it is. Maybe you'll think it is, I don't know. We just wanted to explain."

Will smoothed his hair back several times in a row. "What he's trying to say is that you were right the other day. People are always telling you they'll fill you in later, and we never do. Everyone else in the party knows, and it's not fair to leave you out."

El felt her stomach flip. This was serious. She set her drink down on

the end table and leaned forward. "Is everything okay? What's going on?"

The boys looked at each other for a moment, both opening their mouths without saying anything.

Eleven forced a short chuckle that stuck in her throat on the way out. "You are making me scared."

"Sorry, sorry. It's just we've never told anyone this. Everyone who knows just sorta found out on accident, so I don't know how to say it," Mike mumbled as he scratched his shoulder. "Max broke up with Lucas because he was being a dick to me and Will. And he was being a dick cause, uh, well," he swallowed and looked to Will with wide eyes.

"Lucas decided not to speak to us anymore because he found out we're gay." Will breathed out fast. "Like ripping off a band-aid," he whispered.

"Well, I'm not gay *exactly*," Mike added, to which Will winced.

"Sorry man, I didn't mean..."

"It's cool."

Both boys turned to El, who felt their heavy stares like a soaking winter coat. "Sorry but," she picked at her thumb, feeling dumb, "what's gay?"

A beat passed before the boys started laughing. Will must have seen the look of hurt on El's face, because he reigned it in quickly, waving his hands as shaking his head. "No, sorry, sorry. It's fine, why would you know that word? It's just not the response we were prepped for is all."

El puffed out her chest, trying to salvage her injured pride. "What is 'gay?'"

"Gay means..." Mike took a breath. "it means we're dating each other, El."

She blinked. "Okay? I'm confused, why is Lucas mad? Does he want to date one of you?"

Mike froze and Will snorted. "No, he does not want to date one of us."

"So why is he upset?"

"Because we're gay," Mike said.

"That makes no sense!" El was sick and tired of feeling like an idiot and needing everything spelled out for her, sometimes literally. "He wasn't mad when I was gay with you. And he was gay with Max!"

Mike's cheeks puffed out and his face went red, and Eleven could tell he was trying not to laugh. She wanted to punch him. "What's so funny?" she demanded.

"Nothing, nothing," Will nudged Mike. "That's our fault, we explained the word wrong. 'Gay' isn't when two people are dating, it's when a guy wants to date guys or a girl wants to date girls."

She flopped back in her chair and threw her arms up. "That still makes no sense! Why is he angry?"

Mike, who's face was no longer strained in laughter, bit his lip. "Because the Bible says that man shall not lie with man as he does with woman. People think it's unnatural. And weird. And wrong."

"Why?"

"Because the Bible says so, and because it's just...there are lots of reasons."

Eleven sniffed. "Hopper says that the Bible is loaded with bullshit about throwing rocks at people, and everyone knows it's bullshit but no one wants to say it."

Mike whistled as Will smiled. "Remind me to talk to Hopper more, he's downright cool," Will commented.

"I still don't get it. Lucas doesn't even read the Bible, why does he

care so much?”

The boys sat in silence for a moment. After a while Mike coughed. “Because he does. You really d-don't see anything weird about it?” his voice cracked.

“You guys really don't understand, do you? *Everything* is weird to me. Before I left the lab, I never saw a kiss. I never saw a store. I never saw a school. Every day people do things that feel unnatural. How am I supposed to know when the world agrees with me on that?”

“So you don't have a problem with us dating?” Will asked, a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“No. But I *do* have a problem with Lucas. No one is allowed to be mean to my friends.”

And that's when Mike burst into tears, which only confused the poor girl more.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So...what do you think? Is it what you expected from El?

## 16. The Hug

### Notes for the Chapter:

TW: The section after the page break line is...intense, to say the least. Proceed with caution. If you'd like to skip it, it'll be summarized in the end note. Also warning for intense slurs.

"So you seriously think you and Judy are gonna become a thing?"

"I'm telling you man, she's into me."

Max snorted and rolled her eyes. "Isn't she always saying no when you ask to hang out?"

Dustin stuck his jaw out as he bent down to undo his bike lock. "She has cheer practice," he mumbled.

"That often?" Mike scoffed. "I think she's just ignoring you."

"The first game of the season is coming up, they have to get ready."

Will turned to his right and smiled at El. "I hope these practices *you've* been going to aren't cheerleading. We'll never see you again."

Max perked up at this. Behind El's back the party had been trying to figure out what she was up to with the mystery after school activity she'd started, but they'd never floated the idea of cheerleader.

"Not telling," she rang out in a sing-song, sticking her tongue out at the end.

Max kicked her skateboard into place underneath her foot. "You guys are the worst. Both of you," she gestured towards Eleven and Dustin. "For real."

"Hey! I'm not as bad as her," the curly haired boy mounted his bike. "She's making me study with her even though she already got off probation. This is valuable time I could be spending getting rejected by Judy Miller."

“Dustin Henderson: so desperate for interaction with girls, he enjoys being rejected.” Mike snorted.

As party continued poking fun at Dustin, Max stood back and smiled to herself. The few weeks since getting back from break had been really good for all of them, and they were beginning to function like actual friends again. Things might not be the same as they used to, but as far as new normals went, this was pretty damn good.

After a few more good jabs, Dustin and El started peddling off to the chief's place to study. Mike and Will followed suit as they biked towards the Wheeler house. Will mouthed 'thank you' to Max as he passed, and she smiled. Lately she'd been spending her afternoons and evenings at the Byers house almost every day, sometimes hanging out with Will and whoever else was around, other times just relaxing. She appreciated the hospitality more than she could even start to express, so when Will had approached her the day before and asked if she could go to her own house so that Mike and him could have some time together, she'd said yes without thinking about it. She didn't regret it, but it left her without real options for what to do with her time. Sure, she could've joined El and Dustin, but they would have asked why she wanted to come to a study session for a class she didn't have, and Max knew that Dustin wouldn't want to hear about the boys wanting alone time. Dustin was acting really cool about the whole thing, but he still had his boundaries.

That left Max with the grand plan of skating around the park for a while before heading home. After watching her four friends disappear in the distance, she was about to push off when she was stopped.

“Hey, Max. Wait!”

*Not now*, was all that went through her head, but she stepped off her board out of instinct. She was in no mood to put up with whatever this was about; she'd had such a nice day and she wasn't about to let it get ruined.

As footsteps approached from behind, Max spoke. “What the hell do you want?”

The crunching gravel slowed. “Oh. Wow, okay. I just wanna talk to



you dude.”

She took a small step back and pivoted on her toes. “Why?”

“I just, uh. I dunno. How're you doing?”

Lucas' skin tone made it hard to tell when he was blushing, but over their time together Max had figured out how to spot it. Right in line with his top lip were two small, ever so slightly flushed patches that shined as Lucas looked at his feet.

“I'm fine. Is that all you wanted?”

“C'mon Maxie, talk to me,” Lucas said.

“Why should I? I don't owe you anything.”

“I know you don't.”

“Glad we have that established,” she smirked.

Max turned away to leave, but as she took her first step she felt a firm grip on her wrist. Out of instinct and habit, she jerked her hand *up-down-out* to escape the grasp, but in the microsecond it took her to do this, Lucas' fingers had already relaxed and let go.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said in a rush. “I didn't mean to make you... I forget sometimes.”

Max shifted and tried not to let her burning embarrassment show. “I know you didn't mean anything.” she allowed.

“I miss you is all.”

And the way he said it – softer and more open than she'd heard him in a long time – almost broke Max's resolve right there. But it didn't. “I know,” she said.

“I miss seeing you and talking to you and having you around. I miss having all of you guys around,” Lucas whispered.

“We're not the ones who decided to end that.”

“I know.”

A beat of silence passed.

“I never meant to hurt anyone,” he continued.

“I know,” Max responded shortly. She wanted to be furious at him. She wanted to be like every other girl her age and be able to say 'oh yeah, my ex-boyfriend is a total douche, I hate him.' But she couldn't say that. She was mad and she was hurt, but mostly she was just sad. She swallowed thickly and looked up. “I miss you too, you know. You keep things real.”

Lucas reached out and placed a hand on her cheek, guiding her eyes to his. “We don't have to miss each other. We could still hang out.”

Max exhaled a short laugh through her nose and gave a half smile.. “No, we can't. Not while you're acting like you are. Even if you changed your mind, even if you said sorry to everyone, you've done so much damage.”

She watched as the boy she used to love closed his eyes, breathed in and out slowly, and opened them again. “I get it. Maybe things will change, maybe the boys will rethink things, or I'll...I dunno. I'm hoping this isn't goodbye but, uh,” he shifted and let his hand fall from her face, “could I have I hug? Or...?”

Max laughed openly and wiped at the moisture she hadn't realized had been building in her eyes. A timid hug request from the guy who used to sweep her up from behind and bombard her with smiling kisses. “Yeah. Yeah you can.”

She leaned into her former friend, and realized she too hoped this wasn't the end of things for them. The embrace was awkward at first, but then Max released the tension from her shoulders, Lucas resituated, and boom – it felt exactly like it used to. If Max focused, she could wipe the past semester from her mind and pretend that none of this had ever happened. That they were still the shining-eyed couple they used to be.

But she didn't pretend. She didn't want to. She was glad things had

changed in her life. She had a home away from home, she felt protected, and she wasn't just "Lucas' girlfriend" anymore. She was Max, a full-fledged member of The Party. It just sucked that it took so much pain to get her there.

---

Max didn't get home until three hours later. She only spent about one of those hours skating at the park, but every time she started to head back, her feet led her towards one of her and Lucas' old haunts. She went to the arcade, then the creek where they used to skip stones, then the corn field they'd gotten lost in last summer, and finally the clearing in the woods. It was there that she finally took a moment to cry. She was sitting in the exact spot she'd experienced the most intimate moments of her life. It was also the spot she watched Mike and Will's faces turn from bliss to pure panic. It was an image she'd never be able to get out of her mind. Max often wondered how Lucas could have done everything he did after seeing his best friends so afraid and vulnerable. When her mind started to go down that path was when she pushed herself up and decided she really did need to go home.

When Max skated up to her door, kicked her shoes off on the porch, and let herself in, she was still distracted by swirling thoughts of Lucas, the clearing, and the hug. She was so out of it that it took her until she'd opened the fridge door to realize that something was wrong. The food inside was pushed towards the outer edges and some of it was even flipped over. For the first time in her memory, there wasn't a bit of alcohol visible.

Her eyes widened and she straightened up slowly. She took a deep breath and almost choked on the air. How hadn't she noticed the tobacco scent? It engulfed her like it was a wet sheet tangled around her mouth and throat. Max hurried to the nearest window and wrenched it open, which provided instant relief. How many hours of chain smoking had it taken to accumulate that dense of a fog?

An electric chill shot down the girl's spine. Her mom didn't smoke.

Either Billy had come back, or Neil had been in for several hours. And if Neil had broken his daily routine of popping into the house just long enough to grab a drink before leaving for god knows where...Max swallowed. She tried to rationalize this to herself. Maybe he had just gotten fired from this new job, too. Maybe he just wanted a night at home. Maybe everything was fine.

A part of her felt idiotic for freaking out about a messed up fridge and some smoke, but a bigger part of her kept replaying what Hopper had said as he dropped her off at home for the first time after the investigation: *If anything feels off to you, get out. Go to the Byers', come to my place, hell, you can drop by the station if you want. Staying isn't worth your safety, do you understand?*

Did she understand? Did she? Every single hunch she'd ever had about her step-father had turned out to be true, but she'd never reacted so strongly to such little information. Max turned her face towards the window and gasped in breath after gasping breath. She wanted Mrs. Byers. She wanted Will. She wanted Mike or El or Dustin or Hopper or even Lucas for god's sake. Her head felt heavy and she turned around to rest her butt against the counter. She needed to calm down. She'd never reacted well to cigarette fumes, it was probably just the nicotine.

And then she spotted it – the collapsed, now three-legged kitchen chair on the ground; and the splintered cabinet door with the the indent of the chair's seat smashed into the paneling. Max's mind went into hyper-drive. She should go. She should bolt out the door and not look back. But would she be faster on foot or on her skate board? No, that was a bad idea. That'd only make him madder. She should go to her room and hide there all night. No, it'd be too exposed. She should lock the door and use her desk as a blockade. No, bad idea, she should–

*Crack.* The unmistakable sound of glass breaking echoed from the living room, and Max knew she was out of time. She'd waited too long, and now she was stuck.

“You gonna come in here? Or is it gonna take you another fucking hour?”

Max measured his voice like she'd done a million times before. It was slurred, so Neil was definitely buzzed. But it was still understandable, so he wasn't sloppy yet. She exhaled slowly. "I'm coming," she called.

Stiff legs took her into the stained-beige living room with her stepdad front and center. He was sitting up in the off-brown Laze-E-Boy, surrounded by what Max guessed was about seven beer bottles. With Neil's alcohol tolerance, that wasn't too bad.

"Where were you today?" he snarled, his upper lip curling into what could be mistaken for a smile.

"Nowhere." She winced at her own answer. "I mean, I was just skating. The park, the path behind the woods...just skating."

"Skating?"

"Yes sir," she breathed.

"That's funny," he said as he placed his feet on the ground, skillfully avoiding the shattered brown glass littered around. "because I ran into Marge O'Reilly today. Do you know what she told me?"

Max didn't know if she was supposed to answer, so she just blinked through the silence.

"She told me," he continued after a moment, "that when she was dropping off her son's basketball things after school, she saw you and a certain boy hugging. Intimately. Does that ring any bells to you?"

The girl's heart immediately slammed into her throat. Shit shit shit how could she have been so stupid? "It isn't what it sounds like, I swear."

Neil placed his hands on the arm rests of the chair and pushed himself up. "Oh really? Because to me it sounds like my wife's daughter has been whoring around with the neighborhood nigger," he spat, his volume rising with each word.

Max flinched. "It isn't like that. I don't whore a-around, I don't, I didn't...we don't even hang out. Please," she begged. "I promise."

The towering man took a step towards her, which she matched with two steps back. "Do you know how disappointed your mother is going to be when she hears? Do you realize what this makes me look like? That the girl I'm supposed to have under control is running around with some fucking ape?"

"I don't hang out with him, I swear."

"Don't lie to me!" he bellowed.

Max watched as her step-father's hairy arm drew back in preparation, and she tried to duck. But Neil was as fast drunk as he was sober, and she didn't have time to get more than an inch or so down before his open palm made connection. The blow landed on her temple and she stumbled to the side. She cried out at a sharp stab in her foot, and the warm wetness that followed made her realize she'd sliced it on a glass shard. She clutched her face and bent over, trying hard not to cry. Neil hated when she cried.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" he grunted.

"I didn't do anything! I promise you, please."

"You lying slut," Neil spat. He bent over quickly, scooped up one of the beer bottles on the ground, and threw it hard. It collided with the standing lamp beside the couch, and with a spark and a crackle, the light bulb burst as the lampshade gave way. Max shrunk down into herself.

"Ohhh you've done it now. Look what you made me do. Do you know how much that's gonna cost to replace? But you can just pay for it whoring yourself out, huh? It's what you've been doing anyway," he barked a laugh and took yet another step towards the small girl. She tried to back away, but the pain in her foot was pulsing hard and she was almost up against the wall anyway.

"I'm s-sorry. I'll pay for it. Just stop, please," she tried.

Before she had time to realize what was happening, Neil's hand was on her throat, pinning her to the drywall. She reached up to pry his fingers off, but his grip only tightened. She gasped for air, but none

would come. Her eyes burned at the alcohol on the man's breath.

“You think you're better than me, don't you? Think you can stay all calm and mature, make me look bad. You're such a little cunt, you know that? You're not as smart as you think you are.”

He continued on, but Max couldn't make sense of his words anymore. Her lungs were burning and black dots were starting to swallow her vision. With all the strength she had left in her, she put her weight on her good leg and slammed her knee up into Neil's crotch. His grip loosened as he doubled forward, and Max gasped in air. She was still unsteady and her foot was burning, but she knew she didn't have time to recover. While her step-father was shouting expletives, the teen limped her way back into the kitchen. When she was halfway to her goal, her bad leg gave out and she fell, her knee cracking to the ground. A voice in the back of her mind registered that she probably fractured something, but adrenaline and will power pushed her up again.

Max hopped the last five steps, and she almost cried out when she got to rest her arm on the wall. She picked the phone up but her trembling hands pressed all the wrong numbers. She hung up and tried again, tears now falling freely down her face. She sobbed with relief as she pressed down the last button. But before she could even pull her hand away from the receiver, something struck her. Hard. She must have blacked out for a few seconds, because next thing she knew she was crumpled face-down on the floor. She reached a hand to the searing pain radiating from the back of her head, and her palm landed on glass shards and stickiness. Another beer bottle. She morbidly wondered if he swung it at her or if he'd thrown it, but the thought was quickly erased when she felt the blood dripping by her ear and saw it plink softly to the ground in front of her eyes.

As unconsciousness pulled her under again, Max silently prayed that her hands had managed to dial the last 1 of 9-1-1 correctly.

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Summary for those who skipped the last half: Max

stayed out later than she'd planned skating around and thinking. When she got back, intuition told her something was wrong. She thought about leaving the house, but it was too late. She got into a fight with her step-dad that turned physical very fast. The scene ended with her passing out on the floor from a cut to the head, after she (maybe successfully, maybe unsuccessfully) tried to call 911.



## 17. The Ashes

As he entered his house, Will Byers held back laughter and let out a shush.

“Quiet dude, she might be sleeping.”

“Oh shit, sorry,” Mike said in an only slightly more hushed voice.

Will swung the front door slowly into place, and the moment the world was blocked out, he intertwined his fingers with his boyfriend's. He ignored the butterflies that still attacked his stomach every time they touched and started to make his way towards the kitchen before a voice echoed through the halls.

“Is that you guys? C'mere, I need you to save me from crushing boredom.”

Mike laughed and sauntered towards what used to be Jonathan's room, but Will opted for a pit stop by the fridge. “You hungry?” he called.

“Yeah!” two friends shouted in unison.

After not that much thought Will grabbed the bag of Cheetos and a two-liter of Tab soda. He entered the bedroom to find Mike gently pulling the covers back from Max, who didn't exactly look happy about it.

“I'm *fine*,” she said as she pouted a lip and crossed her arms. “Stop treating me like a baby.”

“Oh I'm not pampering you because I want to. I'm doing it 'cause this one is making me,” he nodded his head towards Will, who tried to hide his amusement by sticking out his tongue.

“You'll stop being waited on when you're allowed to walk again, how's that?” he asked.

“A girl slices her foot open and suddenly she's a cripple,” Max muttered.

Both boys snorted at the massive understatement. Last week when his mom came home two hours later than she'd said she would, Will just assumed that things were crazy at the store like always. But when she told him to sit down, he knew something was wrong. The news that Max had a fractured kneecap, a mild concussion, facial bruising, superficial cuts, and moderate blood loss came as hard punch to the gut, which was only made worse by the fact he wasn't allowed to see her until the next day. That first hospital visit was rough. Both Max and Will wouldn't stop apologizing to each other through flowing tears, and Max told him what happened in such chilling detail he wanted to vomit. The second visit, they talked about logistics. Chief Hopper was going to sit on some more paperwork so Max could stay with the Byers again, but they were going to try to get her emancipated. Hop couldn't hide Max and Joyce's lack of relation forever, and Max being made a legal adult just made the most sense.

After that conversation, they didn't mention what happened with Neil. All three days she'd been resting in her room at his house, Max had been grumbling over Will's care, but other than that the topic was avoided. Will completely understood why. He never talked about what things were like when his dad was still around, and after that he never talked about the Upside Down or the Mind Flayer. And throughout all if it, he never talked about the not insignificant period of time he spent hating himself to his very core. That's how things were in Hawkins; bad shit happened all the time, but you were never supposed to mention it. So why should Max break that?

Will shook his head to bring himself back to the conversation. "Stop complaining and tell me what you need."

"I can do it myself," she muttered.

Will rolled his eyes. "No, you can't. Now what all do you need?"

Max sighed. "New bandages for my foot and head, more aspirin, more neosporin, and some water."

Will started to turn to go, but Mike took a step forward. "I got it."

The smaller boy nodded and sat himself gently on the edge of the bed as his friend left. "How're you doing?"

She shrugged. "It hurts, but other than that I'm fine. I'm bored out of my mind though. And I hate this fugly-ass thing," she gestured to the off-white cast on her knee.

Will thought for a second before his eyes lit up. He excused himself to his own room for a few seconds and returned. "I have an idea."

"What's that?" Max asked.

"You'll see, it'll be cool. You'll like it, trust me."

When Mike came back several minutes later, Will was hunched over Max's leg. Will could sense his boyfriend walking towards them and he shifted to the side to allow for a clear line of sight to what he was doing. He smiled at Mike's hum of approval. Will felt the familiar feeling of laser-focus wash over him and he smiled. He missed this – he hadn't really had time to work like this in forever. He merely shifted to the side as his boyfriend buzzed around tending to Max's various injuries, but he forced himself to come (partially) back down to earth when Mike finished and sat beside him.

"So how was school, guys? Did I miss anything cool?"

Will heard a snort. "Does anything cool ever happen?"

"Good point," Max conceded. "But tell me anyway. It had to be more interesting than here."

Mike fell silent and Will could practically feel what the boy was thinking. "It's okay man, tell her," he said.

"Tell me what?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Will saw Mike rub his jaw. "Things are bad with the Troy-slash-John-slash-locker situation."

"I thought El took care of that?" Max asked.

"She did," Mike said quickly. "Or at least she tried. But Troy came to me today, and apparently John thinks this is all some trick Troy's playing on him? Like, John thinks that Troy is so pissed about not being believed that El can move things, that he's somehow rigging

John's shit to move.”

“That's ridiculous,” the girl muttered as she tried to get a look at what exactly Will was doing. He moved a hand to block her sight.

“Is it any more ridiculous than a lab experiment girl with super powers?” Mike asked.

“Fair enough. How bad is that for you guys?”

Will swallowed and cleared his throat. “Bad. I guess John's mad at Troy, which means Troy is mad at us. Which means we don't know what's gonna happen.” The smaller boy focused all of his attention down towards what he was working on, because he knew if he so much as glanced toward his boyfriend, Mike would look back at him with those hard but watery eyes. Will knew that he was trying to be strong and act like he was at peace with it, but they both knew that was a farce.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” Max said.

There was a long moment of silence as Will kept working and they all kept eating. Although the break in conversation started out with tensed muscles, after a while the release of tension in the room was almost palpable. Will's mind was just drifting off to what he wanted for dinner when Max spoke again.

“You know it's a shame that people can't know?”

“Know what?” Mike asked.

“That you two are together. You're super cute, definitely power couple material.”

Will snorted as he looked up for a minute. “Yeah, sure, we're a regular Danny and Sandy.”

He stooped his head as Mike chuckled a Cheeto at him. “Shut up, we're goddamn adorable.”

“I'm gonna kill you,” Will said, but he couldn't help but laugh.

The bed shifted as Mike moved from his seat next to Max's head to the spot right next to Will. "No, you're not. I'm too cute," he said as he ruffled his boyfriend's hair.

Will scowled and swatted his hand away, but he was smiling. "Shut up. You're distracting me from my work," he gestured to Max's cast.

"Distraction is what I do best."

Will felt his stomach flip as Mike leaned over and placed a gentle, warm kiss on the top of his head. He held his breath. Every since they'd made up, this was normal for them. But they'd never even gone as far as hugging in front of anyone else. Will's eyes darted towards Max.

"Ugg, if you guys could stop rubbing the fact that I'm hopelessly single in my face, that'd be great. Fucking cute ass bullshit. Not fair."

Will exhaled and smiled as he felt Mike gently take his free hand. The phrase 'hopelessly single' turned the conversation to Dustin and his miserable romantic failures, but Will just let it all wash over him. It was weird. So many things were up in the air – Max's home situation, all the stuff with Troy, Lucas' friendship – but he felt more at ease than he had in a long time. Maybe it was because he'd been through so much stress he had no more anxiety left to give. Maybe it was because the shit had already hit the fan so much that there wasn't too much farther it could go. Or maybe it was because for the first time in his life, he was being completely honest with the people he cared about most in the world. It could've been a mix of all three, but it wasn't important. The important thing was that he was here, actually enjoying himself without anything pestering at the back of his mind.

"Earth to William Byers, you there?"

The boy snapped back into reality. "Hmm?"

"Max's asked you three times if she's done yet."

Will gave a sheepish smile as he realized he'd stopped working a while ago. "For now I guess. My hand hurts anyway."

He set down the orange sharpie and leaned back from her cast to let

her get an unobstructed view. Centered in her kneecap was a ash-covered baby phoenix looking straight out of the drawing as fire licked at its talons. Will tried to capture Max's stubborn strength in the glint of the bird's blue eyes, but he wasn't sure it came across. He had to admit to himself that he *was* rather proud of the gray soot specks across the phoenix's face that mirrored Max's freckles. He wanted to add a background, but the doctor said the cast should be on for at least six weeks, so he had time.

When no one said anything, Will started to get nervous. "If you don't like it I can try to do a cover-up. I know I got the eyes all wrong, and I promise it's not finished."

"Will," Max said quietly.

"Yeah?"

"This is one of the best things you've ever made, which is saying something."

Mike let out a low whistle. "He fucking free-handed that with forty-five minutes and four sharpies."

Will swallowed hard. "You said you thought your cast was ugly, so I wanted to give you something to look at," he looked down to try to hide his growing blush. It was no use though, as Mike wrapped his arms around Will's waist from behind and pulled him in for a hug.

"You're amazing," Mike breathed in his ear.

Will turned his head until he was face to face with his friend, only inches away. "And you're exaggerating."

The Byers boy widened his eyes in surprise when Mike closed the distance to kiss him, but he quickly got over it as the familiar sparks started shooting through his body. How could something so natural feel so ethereal at the same time? Will's hand was halfway to Mike's cheek when he felt several soft hits on the side of his head.

"For fuck's sake, if you're gonna be perfect do it somewhere else!" Max whined. "I'm trying to be a lazy piece of shit here and you two are ruining it."

Will laughed as Mike pulled back, picked up one of the fallen Cheetos, and threw it back at her. "Make us."

Max then tossed the whole bag, which hit Will's chest before bouncing off and landing on the floor, scattering toxically orange chips everywhere.

She laughed loudly. "Ha! You're the one that's gonna have to clean that up!"

"Oh you wanna play that way, Mayfield? 'Cause we can play that way."

As he watched Mike gathering up floor Cheetos and sprinkling them in Max's hair, Will couldn't help but grin. Strictly speaking, this was the second kiss of theirs that Max interrupted. Somehow he couldn't bring himself to mind.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Last chapter was so rough, I wanted to give you guys some time to breathe. Also this scene just came to me and it was too cute not to do. What did you think? Also, I'm like 90% sure that there are only two more chapters left, so buckle up.

## 18. The Reaction

“Here, gimme that.”

“No,” Max huffed.

“C'mon, you need help. Please.”

Lucas was surprised when Max stopped crutch-limping and spun to face him. “No actually, I don't need help. I can get along just fine on my own, so you can go back to whatever you were doing before.”

He took a breath and tried to pretend that that didn't hurt his ego. “Okay, lemme try again. You don't *need* my help, but walking would be a lot easier if you didn't have to carry your books against your stomach with half a hand. So will you please let me take them for you?”

He could tell she was considering her options, but when her notebook started slipping down her body, Lucas reached out and scooped up the school supplies. She mumbled something that sounded like she'd given in, and after the quick handoff they set off again towards the cafeteria, Lucas making sure walk slow enough that Max could keep up on her crutches. After an awkward minute of silence he cleared his throat.

“So how's your first day back?”

“Good.”

“Do you have a shit ton of make up work, or did you do it while you were out?”

“You can't study with a concussion, so I have to do it now.”

He chewed on his lip. “That sucks. So how're you doing? Like, in general?”

“I'm fine, Lucas,” she kept her eyes forward so when he glanced toward her, all he saw was cheek.



He wanted to be mad at her, but in all honesty he didn't blame her for being like this. "Hey," he said softly. "Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask anything you want to. Doesn't mean I'll answer."

"The day you got hurt, it was the same day we talked outside the school. Was that...did Neil...was that because of me?"

Max didn't say anything, but the sudden halt in her steps told Lucas all he needed to know. He felt his stomach churn.

"Shit Maxie, I'm so sorry. If I'd had any idea it was that bad, if I thought you could've been hurt like that, I never would have tried to talk to you." His eyes widened as he realization walked over him. "Fuck, should I even be talking to you now? Is this safe?"

The redhead sighed. "This is fine, don't worry. I'm with the Byers again, and I don't have to go back to that house."

He nodded. "I'm glad to hear that."

"You're happy that I'm spending more time with Will? I thought that you weren't cool with that."

Lucas bit his lip. "I mean, yeah, it's not exactly a great idea socially, but you love hanging out with Byers. And it's better than being at your house"

Max dropped her voice. "I thought I was *'too smart to stay around the queers.'*"

"That's not what I meant and you know it. It's not that there's anything wrong with them, it's just social suicide when word gets out."

Lucas shifted his weight when Max's jaw fell open. He waited for her to speak, but she didn't say anything.

"What? What is it now?" he eventually muttered.

"D-did you hear what you just said?"

“Oh c'mon Max, we've been through this before, when people find out—”

“Shut up, not that,” she waved a hand. “You just said it. 'It's not like there's anything wrong with them.' So you admit it!”

Lucas opened his mouth to say something, but he couldn't think of anything. He hadn't said that, had he? He must have misspoke. Or at least he didn't mean it. How could something so idiotically risky be okay? His thoughts were getting muddled. “That's not what I meant,” he said eventually.

“If you say so.”

“I miss you dude. I miss you a lot.”

She lifted a hand from her crutch to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. She huffed out air and her jaw softened a little. “You could come back, you know. If you got your shit together and apologized to everyone, maybe things could be okay again.”

Lucas felt his heart lift before he stomped it back down again. “Yeah, like Will and Mike would ever forgive me.”

“They might.”

“I'm pretty sure they think I'm the world's biggest douche,” he said.

Max gave him a smile, lopsided smile. “You may think the world revolves around you,” Lucas slid back and smiled as she tried to poke at his ribs, “but they actually have bigger problems right now. Another person on their side might be nice.”

“What do you mean? What's going on?”

“We don't know everything, but Troy and John are fighting more so Troy's gotten a lot more unpredictable. We're afraid he might go after Will, or tell people that...” the boy saw Max's small adam's apple bob as she swallowed. “you know. Tell people.”

“Fuck. That's bad. Is there anything I can do to help?”

She laughed harshly “I can't believe you're even asking that question. Two months ago it would've been all 'well what did they think would happen.'”

He shrugged. “Funny what missing your friends can do.”

The redhead nodded back. “Yeah. But as far as helping them, just get the fuck over yourself and come back already. We miss you too. Dick.”

Lucas smirked. “I don't know if I can do that. If I support what they're doing...” he closed his eyes, “I dunno. It gets all weird, you know?”

“If you could take a magic pill and forget that they're together, would you do it and just get your ass back with us?”

“Yeah, duh.”

“So pretend you don't know,” she said softly.

“It's not that easy.”

“Why can't it be?”

Lucas took a breath. “I don't know Max, it's complicated. I don't know right now.”

The girl resituated her armpits on her crutches and started moving forward again. “Well get it together. You can come and pick me up to carry my shit after lunch. Get to the table a bit early so we can get to my class on time. I'm a slow motherfucker right now.”

He chuckled. “Yes ma'am.”

---

Lucas sat at his table of biology class acquaintances staring at The Party while trying not to make it too obvious. God he missed them. Obviously he missed Max, but in truth it was everyone. And yeah,

Dustin still talked to him in the hallways or in classes, but it wasn't the same. He missed big group hang outs, he missed D&D, and he even missed silent bike rides. His parents had started asking why he wasn't going out with friends anymore and he was running out of excuses. A small part of him wanted to laugh at it all; he'd broken off from the group because he'd been worried that Will and Mike's faggotry would ruin his social life. Well, look where that had landed him.

Lucas had taken his lunch tray up a while ago and was just staring at his watch, trying to decide when was an acceptable time to approach the table to collect Max's stuff and help her through the hallways. Had she warned the rest that he'd be there? How would they react? Would they ignore him? Things were so messed up. He hated this. He decided to wait until five minutes before the bell, but at eight minutes out he couldn't sit still any longer.

The boy brushed off his jeans, stretched his neck, and stood up. He took a few steps towards his former friends, still debating if he should sit back down and wait longer. But he was too far forward, he had to go for it. Lucas relaxed his shoulders and headed towards the table as he prayed he looked more confident than he felt. When he was about fifty feet away, Will looked up at him. He continued walking and flashed a smile, but Will turned to tap Mike's shoulder. And then Mike was looking at him as well, and neither of their faces were friendly. He was still too far away to hear anything they might be saying, but the general posture and movement of the group made Lucas suspect that conversation had stopped. Eleven, Max, and Dustin followed suit to look over, each showing a different type of horror or disbelief. Lucas felt his stomach drop and he slowed down. Why was Max looking at him like that, too? She had invited him. He wanted to melt into the dirty cafeteria tiling.

Then, without warning, the boy was thrown off his balance and stumbled forward. He started to turn around to see who the hell had shoved him, but that person was already barreling ahead of him. Lucas shot another glance over to the party, only to find their eyes on the person who'd bumped into him. He felt a split-second of relief that the malice wasn't directed at him after all before his veins turned to ice. His stare focused in on the kid stalking quickly towards his

best friends – Troy. A million thoughts and memories attacked Lucas' mind at once.

*“Will and Mike might have bigger problems right now.”*

What the hell was Troy rushing over there for?

*“They don't know what he'll do.”*

Rumor that if Troy started one more fight he'd get expelled, was he really going for that?

*“We're afraid he might...tell people.”*

Lucas' eyes went wide as one last thing registered in his consciousness – the soft electric hum that meant the announcement microphone had been left on again. The microphone that was just feet behind the party. The microphone Troy was headed straight towards.

For the first time since the issues with the Upside Down, Lucas acted without thought. Before he'd even acknowledged the decision, his legs were pumping him forward. He was gaining on Troy, but his momentary confusion had given the kid a good head start on him, and he was almost to the mic. Lucas pushed himself closer. Just a twenty foot gap to close. Troy was blowing past where the boys sat. Ten foot gap. Troy's hand was reaching out to steady the mic stand. Five feet. He was clearing his throat.

*Slam.* Lucas catapulted himself forward to cover the remaining ground, his body colliding with his enemy's mid-air. He felt the wind rush out of his body as he landed on top of Troy in a crumple. Lucas was vaguely aware of a certain amount of shouting and chaos surrounding him, and he knew the boy underneath him was spitting insults, but he couldn't focus on any of that. His mind was rushing with the image of Will and Mike's secret being announced to the entire school. His vision flashed with scenes of his friends bloodied and bruised, the boys getting screamed at, Will in tears. Lucas imagined the expression and Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler's faces when the Hawkins gossip finally circulated to them. He thought of his own parents' reaction, telling him not to hang around with disgusting

faggots. With a sickening twist in his stomach, Lucas realized his worst case scenario involved his parents repeating the very same things that he himself had told his best friends.

Something flashed in the corner of his eye; Lucas ducked and narrowly avoided Troy's right hook. Without thinking, Lucas jackhammered an elbow square into the other boy's nose. He wasn't quite sure if the *crunch* was satisfying or sickening. The fountain of blood dripping to the floor only seemed to energize Troy.

“What the fuck?!” he grunted as he shoved into Lucas.

Lucas drew backwards with the force, but fought to stay on top. “You stay away from them, got it? Keep your mouth shut.”

The bully spat blood in his opponent's face. “You think you scare me, nigger boy?”

Lucas leaned forward and pressed his arm across Troy's throat. Judging by the increased shouting around him, he estimated he didn't have much time left. “I should, cause if you say anything to anyone, I'll fucking break you in half.”

“You know your little buddies are fags, right?”

Lucas' lips curled up into a snarl. “Yeah, but they're my fags. And if you hurt them I'll fucking kill you.” He had time to bring his fist down once more before he felt strong hands grasp his arms and haul him up. As the lunch monitors started dragging him to the office, Lucas caught Mike's eye. He gave the confused boy a smile and a small nod before stumbling forward to his punishment. He still didn't know how he felt about this whole thing, but at least he knew how he was going to act.

## Notes for the Chapter:

Were y'all expecting the microphone to come back in a major way? Also, next chapter is the last! So if you have any questions, ask them in the comments so I can answer them in the final end note.

## 19. The Future

### Notes for the Chapter:

Surprise! This isn't the last chapter. I started to write the last chapter, but then I realized I needed this to happen first. Sorry? I dunno. Anyway, there's one more after this. Sorry it took so long. Enjoy.

"I dunno, like a big house and a nice little garden thing?"

"A house and a garden, is that really all you got?"

"And a car?"

Will made a show of sighing and pushing into Mike's chest. "You need to dream bigger for your future, or at least dream more specifically."

He tried to scowl when Mike pressed a kiss to the top of his head, but in the end Will just scooted in closer and switched his head from the pillow to Mike's shoulder. "Like you have your whole life planned out."

"As a matter of fact, I do." Will said.

"Feel free to share."

"Survive high school, then get the hell out of Indiana for college. But somewhere close so I can visit Mom and Jonathan, so maybe Chicago? I don't know. Then I wanna go to the west coast and be an art teacher. I'm not good enough to teach high school or do studio classes, but I could help kids finger paint and stuff." He smiled, "Who knows, maybe I'll even have a house or a car like you."

"Dude," Mike said softly.

Will pulled back to look at his boyfriend's wide eyes. "What?"

"I dunno, I just didn't realize that you had to much figured out. And for the record, you're totally good enough to teach studio classes."

He poked his toes on his friend's shin and pulled Mike's bedroom blanket closer to his chin to hide his flush. "Like you know enough about art to even tell."

Mike shrugged. "Good point. But I've seen what you do and I've seen what the Hawkins teachers can do, and you're better. Hands down."

"They're different styles, you can't compare them."

"Whatever you say Picasso. I'm just saying I think you're pretty amazing."

"Well I think you're pretty...shut up," Will scrunched his face and stuck his tongue out, but he realized he must look ridiculous, so he let it turn into a laugh. Mike echoed the chuckle until it died out and the boys were left lying on the bed in silence.

Will inhaled deeply. Never in a million years had he thought he'd end up in his best friend's bed, snuggling and talking as naturally as breathing. Sure, he'd fantasized out it, but he'd also fantasized about being able to fly. Lying there, surrounded by the faint scent of vanilla and wood, Will couldn't help but imagine *this* as his future. There would be complications...but just maybe it could work. He wasn't getting his hopes up – he had the distinct feeling that their relationship had an expiration date of graduation at the latest. But stranger things had happened.

He was pulled from his thoughts when he realized there were tears in his boyfriend's eyes.

"Woah, hey there. Where's your head at?" Will asked softly, untangling an arm from the blanket to reach up and cup Mike's face.

The older boy just shook his head. "'s nothing," he mumbled.

"Babe, c'mon. Please talk to me."

"I'm fine."

Will bit his lip. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but I'm worried."



Mike sighed and wiped his eyes. "It's stupid, I'm fine, I promise. I'm just thinking."

Will swallowed his curiosity and shifted his body backwards and up, and with a few more movements Mike's head was now resting in the dip of Will's shoulder. Will reached down and started circling patterns into his boyfriend's hair with his finger.

After another moment, Mike cleared his throat and wrapped his arm around Will's body. "It's just that you're so good. You have everything planned out and you know who you are and what you want, and I have no idea. And I want to be good for you, too. But I'm scared and I don't know what I'm doing. And you know what kills me the most?"

Will wasn't sure if he was actually supposed to answer, so he stayed silent.

"You're okay with all that," Mike continued. "I freaked out at you and I'm a mess and you're still all *'as slow as you need, I promise.'* And you're so good. You're just so good and I can't even make myself say what I want to say because I'm a scared little baby."

Will's stomach began to turn, and he looked down at his now-crying friend. His lungs felt heavy. Why did this sound like a breakup speech? God, let this be anything but a breakup speech.

"If this is too much for you, we can back it up a little," Will tried to pull back to give some space, but Mike held on tighter.

"That's not what I'm saying."

Will looked down at those shining green-brown eyes. His friend had never seemed smaller. "I don't understand." He reached to brush a strand of curly hair out of his boyfriend's eyes.

"I'm trying, fuck. Why is this so hard. Why am I so scared." Mike leaned forward and buried his head in Will's chest. "I'm trying to say that I love you."

Will's heart just about soared through his chest. He swallowed slowly. "Please don't be scared. I love you too. It's okay. As slow as you need. I love you too."

After that, the two just laid there for a long while, absorbing what had just happened. Will didn't quite understand how the conversation had ended up there, but he was glad it did. For the thousandth time, he realized just how lucky he was. After an immeasurable amount of time, Mike muttered something into Will's chest.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

He looked up. "Spot."

Will cocked his eyebrows. "What?"

"For my future plans. I want a dog named Spot. I want a garden and a car and a dog named Spot."

Will Byers couldn't help the massive smile that spread across his cheeks. To some people, the dog comment might have seemed out of the blue, but he understood perfectly. He knew that it wasn't a random outburst. He knew that it meant that Mike was scared, and needed to back up to a lighter topic. He knew that it meant that Mike needed a second to compose himself. Will knew that it meant Mike and him were okay, even if they operated in a way that was far from conventional."

"I want a kitten named Gismo," Will whispered.

"I want a fish named Watson," Mike added.

"I want a lizard named Elizardbeth"

Mike snorted and looked up, tears still dotting his cheeks. "I want a cow named Cowie."

"I want a peacock named Harris."

"And I want a boyfriend named Will."

Will smile before leaning down to press a soft kiss to Mike's lips. "And you don't even have to wait for the future for that one."

## 20. The End

No one in the entirety of Hawkins School District could have guessed that Dustin Henderson would be one of those kids that shot up, shot out, and bulked up in the transition from middle school to high school – and that disbelief included Dustin himself. But after it happened, he assumed that that was his big transformation, that was the curve ball in his development from boy to man. And then that damn sketch book had to go and fall open and send him into a whole other type of metamorphosis. Before that locker room incident he'd never stopped to think about homosexuality, and when he did it wasn't exactly in the most positive light.

But here he was, trying not to roll his eyes as he guided his friend through the baby steps he himself had taken months ago.

“If it's too weird for you, just don't mention it at all.”

“How do I *not* mention it though? Is that even possible?”

Dustin took his right hand off his bike handle to rub at his eyes. “Just be like you've been for the last six years of friendship. Just be normal.”

“But I haven't known for six years,” Lucas replied.

“Pretend it doesn't make a difference and eventually it won't.”

The boys continued to bike towards the school. Dustin felt more uneasy with every pedal – maybe this was too soon. Everyone had agreed to this, but were they really ready yet? On the other hand, if they waited any longer, the rift between Lucas and the others might grow so big it couldn't ever be closed. Dustin was worried that that'd already happened.

After they'd arrived and locked up their bikes, Dustin took a breath and started walking towards the gymnasium light that illuminated the way-too-early winter twilight. As they approached the school and pushed through the doors, Lucas swore.

“What? What is it?”

“Principal Franklin is here,” he hissed.

“Why does that matter?” Dustin asked.

“Technically speaking, my suspension doesn't end until tomorrow.”

“Are you fucking kidding me dude?”

Lucas pulled up his hood and Dustin stood up straight to try to hide his friend behind his massive frame. “Today was the last day I couldn't go to class, so I figured it'd be fine. But then the damn principal had to show up and I'm still not allowed at school functions 'til tomorrow.”

Dustin wanted to punch him. “You're an idiot, you know that?”

“Just get me somewhere safe.”

The bigger teen began awkwardly shuffling towards the rightmost door, making sure to keep the front of his body angled towards Principal Franklin as to hide Lucas. Hawkins wasn't exactly a diverse town, and if anyone in administration glimpsed brown skin, there'd be a very small pool of possible students. After a few more awkward maneuvers, the friends were able to push their way into the school building and out of sight of the principal. Dustin relaxed as he stepped back to look at Lucas again.

“As if tonight wasn't delicate enough without added obstacles.”

“Sorry man, I didn't think I'd be an issue.”

“Of course you didn't. Let's just go.”

They walked towards the gym doors, silently promising the concession stand that they'd be back at half-time. As Dustin had intended, they were the first ones out of their friend group. They headed towards the bleachers and took their seats just a few rows from the ground. Dustin had been planning on using this time to give Lucas more info on all the things he'd missed, but almost immediately after settling in and taking their jackets off, Max, Will, and Mike

came through the doors and made their way towards the others.

“Just be normal dude,” Dustin whispered before standing up and waving to his friends. “Hey guys! Max, you're really working those crutches. I think you're faster now than you were when you walked normally.”

When the newcomers reached the bottom of the stairs, Max passed her crutches off to Mike and wrapped her arm around Will's shoulders, letting him help her up. “Any chance to show you all that I'm better on one leg than you are on two.” She stuck her tongue out. Despite the brave face Dustin swore he heard a muffled wince when she sat herself down on the end of the row closest to the stairs. Mike and Will shuffled past her and paused for a moment. Dustin bit his lip. Shit, he hadn't thought this through. Where was everyone gonna sit? Max was on the end, and there was a good bit of space between her and Lucas, and it'd be weird for him to scoot all the way down to be next to her. Dustin had kind of assumed that he and Max would serve as buffers, but as it was now they were both on the ends. After another moment of hesitation, Will and Mike sat down next to Max, still careful to leave a hole between themselves and Lucas. Dustin shifted awkwardly.

“Slide in dude, you're being weird,” he whispered to Lucas.

“I'm leaving room for El.”

“She's not coming.”

Lucas sniffed. “Oh. Okay.”

The other boy did as he was told, and Dustin tried not to visibly wince at how uncomfortable Lucas looked seated next to Will. Dustin was just planning what to say to get comfortable conversation going when Lucas beat him to it.

“So why isn't El here? She's studying again?”

Dustin let himself smile. With all the stress over Lucas returning, he'd forgotten about the big reveal. “She actually is here, it's just she won't be sitting with us.”

“Who's she sitting with?” Will asked.

“No one. She'll be too busy showing off what she can do to sit down. There was a reason I wanted us to hang out at this game.”

He chuckled as he watched all four of his friends' mouths drop. “No way,” Max whispered.

“She's a *basketball player*?” Mike asked incredulously.

“I never said that.”

“So she IS a cheerleader!” Lucas exclaimed, pumping his fist. “I knew it.”

Dustin *tsk*-ed. “I never said that either.”

There was a moment of silence before Mike's head whipped around to look at the reserved bleachers where the pep band kids were slowly filtering in.

“Not that either, but nice thinking,” Dustin said.

By this point, the gym was getting busier and busier, so the Party had to speak louder, those on the ends leaning forward and around to be closer to the center of conversation.

“Is she the team manager?” Max asked.

“Nope.”

“Concession stand volunteer?” Mike tried.

“No.”

“Ball retriever?” Will asked.

Dustin snorted. “Since when do the ball retrievers have practices to go to? Or concession stand volunteers?”

As the seats continued to fill with game time drawing closer, the friends squabbled back and forth. Dustin was honestly surprised that they hadn't figured it out by that point, but it was nice to see them

cooperating and laughing again. He was about to give the 'five minutes until the reveal' warning when he heard Lucas swear.

“What's up man? Finally figured it out?”

“No,” he hissed. “Over there, look. Mr. Franklin. Since when do principals come to girls JV games? Shit, I'm so busted. This is bad,” Lucas said.

“What's going on?” Will asked.

“He's not technically off suspension yet. He can't be here,” Dustin answered, looking from side to side, as if he would find a solution sitting on the other side of Max. When he looked back up, his heart stopped. Mr. Franklin was walking right towards them. He'd seen Lucas, or if he hadn't he was about to. Before he could move a muscle, a group of bouncing cheerleaders began pouring through the main doors, creating a momentary barrier.

“Shit, what do we –”

“I should go and –”

“We're completed fucked, and –”

Everyone started babbling at once so that no individual voice could be heard clearly. As Dustin's brain just started to unthaw, Will turned to his left and tackled Lucas backwards. Dustin wanted to die. What the hell could Lucas have said in the two seconds of chaos to piss Byers off like that?! Jesus Christ, it was the last thing they needed right now. The two boys were scrambling in the floor space between their bleacher row and the one above them when suddenly Mike leaned down and started moving body parts as well. Everything was disintegrating and Dustin couldn't even make himself move to do anything about it.

“Excuse me kids, where did Mr. Sinclair go?”

Everyone's heads whipped around to look at Mr. Franklin, who was standing right in front of them. Dustin was lost. What was that supposed to mean? Lucas was right there with them. After a beat of silence, the boy scratched his arm in a way that allowed him to

casually look over his shoulder at what was behind him. It was all he could do not to burst into laughter.

His friend's hadn't been fighting at all. Lucas was tucked in the space between the bleacher rows with Will laying directly on top of him, covering a good seventy percent of him. Mike was leaning back and obnoxiously resting his head on the legs of the students behind them – a position that covered the rest of Lucas. Fucking geniuses.

“What do you mean, sir?” Max asked, batting her eyelashes.

“I saw your friend over here with you a moment ago, where is he now?”

Mike cocked his head to the side. “He told us he can't come back to school yet, so we didn't invite him. It's just us.”

Mr. Franklin's mustache shifted as he made a face. “I don't know what you kids have been up to lately, but you've been getting yourselves in a great deal of trouble. I wouldn't recommend making it worse. I know I saw your friend Lucas here a minute ago, and you're going to tell me where he ran off to.”

“I'm sorry, I really don't know what you're talking about. Unless,” Dustin had to hold in a laugh at a fake realization spreading across Mike's face. “are you talking about my cousin? He's in town this week, and he just went off to the bathroom. It might've been him you saw.”

“No, it was not. It was Lucas, I know what the boy looks like.”

“Are you saying that all black people look the same? To be frank, that's incredibly insensitive sir.”

The principal bristled as the party members covered laughs with coughs. “What? N-no, I'm not! I'm just saying I don't believe for a second that *you* have a cousin that looks exactly like Lucas Sinclair.”

Mike's mouth popped open. “And now you're saying I can't have a black cousin? This is like the Disney World incident all over again. Jesus,” he sighed and threw up his hands. “Now we have to wait for Jacob to get back and explain to him that he's being harassed and he



wasn't even here for it! Family is family, sir, and you're being really cruel and close-minded right now.”

“Mr. Wheeler, I assure you that's not what's –”

“Just once I want to be able to say he's my cousin without people giving us shit for it. Maybe my mom was right, maybe I should start filing complaints whenever this happens. I just want it to stop. Mr. Franklin, who do I talk to to make a statement?”

“That won't be necessary,” the man said quickly. “I'm sorry for the mistake. It's fine. Tell Jacob we welcome him to our school.” He swallowed and shifted his weight. “And Mr. Byers, please sit up. This is a basketball game, not nap time.”

The entire party sat frozen still as the older man waddled out away from them, around the sidelines, and out of the gym. The second the doors closed, they all burst out wheezing. Will and Mike tried to scramble up, but the body-shaking laughter slowed them down.

“I can't believe you fucking did that,” Lucas coughed between snorts.

“Did I say anything racist in there?” Mike asked.

“No, it was great, I loved it. Thanks man. But you did just say 'shit' in front of our principal and got away scott free, which pisses me off so much. I got detention for 'damn' once.”

Will wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. “I think that's the best thing I've ever seen. You should become an actor.”

Mike waved a hand, “Nah. I can only pull it out when I need to, like when my friend's about to be suffocated because this lard-ass is laying on his chest.”

Dustin smiled as Will reached over to punch him. “Shut up, I weigh half a pound and everyone knows it.”

Dustin sighed with content. “Truly Oscar worthy my dude. I can't believe that worked. Where've you been hiding that talent? Can you get everyone out of trouble? Cause there's a lot of dumb shit I'd like to do.”

Max shook her head. "I wouldn't believe this actually happened if I didn't see it myself. Like, did you see Franklin's face? He looked like he wanted to melt into the ground."

"I think everyone wishes he'd melt into the ground," Lucas said, which started another round of laughter.

Dustin didn't have time to fully soak in this new sense of relaxed casualty when the gymnasium light dimmed. The pep band started to play a quiet, low theme as two spotlights Dustin was surprised the school could afford started circling random patterns around the walls and ceilings. The athletic coordinator started spewing some over-hyped introduction into the microphone about the first game of the season, but the boy was too busy watching his friends to pick up exactly what he was saying. As the players were introduced and started jogging out to meet the cheerleaders on the court, Dustin saw his friends start squinting at everyone out there. He smiled and decided not to say anything for a little bit longer.

"Is she out there yet?"

"I can't see her?"

"Wait, is the girl with her bangs in front of her face El?"

"No dumbass, that's Kate Skinner."

"Is she the light operator?"

"No, that's a dude."

The party bickered back and forth as Dustin offered only smiles for answers. He was so proud of Eleven. She'd fought so hard to get off academic probation, and despite having seven less years of education than everyone else, she'd done it. Everyone was psyched to have her back at the lunch table, but this was the moment he'd kept telling her to envision when she wanted to give up and burn her homework. And there they were. Dustin was grinning like an idiot.

"C'mon folks, I know you can give our Lady Tigers a warmer welcome to their season than that!" the athletic director boomed into the mic. "Or do we need some help?"

And with that line, Dustin saw the realization strike all four of his friends at once. Their jaws popped in near-synchronization.

“No,” Mike breathed.

“Of course!” Will gasped.

“We're dumb,” Lucas laughed.

“The most important one on the field, now the most important one on the court. I love it,” Max said, shaking her head.

Greeted by the ruffles of silver and orange pom-poms, out she bounded from the locker rooms. Eleven, invisible inside the Hawkins High Tigers mascot costume, charged into the gym on all fours, somehow managing to keep a decent pace. When she reached the center of the court, she pushed off her back legs into a somersault and sprang up to fully standing. As El started to clap and sway-dance with the cheerleaders around her, Dustin realized his smile was starting to hurt him. The party had gone absolutely *wild* with screams when they realized Eleven was this year's Hawkins Tiger, but the rest of the gym seemed slightly more enthused than usual too. He realized that he wasn't exactly impartial, but El was already looking more energetic to him than the last Tiger.

As El and the cheerleaders went to the sidelines to prepare for the game, the friends turned back to face the group in general.

“I can't think of a club or group she'd enjoy more than this,” Will smiled.

“I can't believe we didn't figure it out, with how excited she was to see the mascot at homecoming,” Mike added.

Dustin laughed. “Yeah. It's great, she gets to be over-the-top hyped without having to know anything about sports. Judy tells her when to be happy and when to be sad, so it works.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow. “So you've been talking to Judy again? She looks nice out there. Her pom-poms are extra shiny.”

Dustin punched him lightly. “Shut up. It's complicated.”

Max leaned forward to get a clear line of sight to him, and Dustin grimaced at the mischievous light in her eyes. “C'mon, spill.”

“Yeah Henderson, you've been weirdly quiet about her lately,” Will teased.

Dustin muttered incoherently in response, but stopped in surprise when he felt Lucas leaning in to shove him.

“Dude, we have all the time in the world. Tell us everything,” he said.

The curly-haired boy could barely contain his joy at hearing that, and at the fact that no one contested the sentiment. Yeah, things were still pretty weird, but Lucas had just been tackled by Will and Mike and then thanked them for it. El was off academic probation and preforming in front of everyone. Troy and John were still dicks, but the group always knew they'd have to deal with that all through school. The party might be a little worse for the wear, but they were together.

They had all the time in the world.

Dustin cleared his throat. “Okay, so here's what's up.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm sorry this took me 26 days to upload, I really wanted to make sure to do the series justice. I would LOVE to hear any parting thoughts -- favorite scenes, most heartbreaking moment, things you'd change.

This fic got way more attention and love than I ever thought it could. Thank you.

### **Author's Note:**

Your comments motivate me to write more, influence the direction I take the story in, and mostly just lighten my heart. Please leave your thoughts, good or

bad (I always need some good constructive criticism)  
Thank you!